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"I'LL INFORM YOU WHAT IT WAS IF I COME DOWN THERE."

Kit Bandy's Big Six;

OR,

The Rustlers of Jackson Basin.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "KIT BANDY'S BRIGADE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE RANGE PATROL.

FOR years the great cattle-barons of the West held almost undisputed sway over the immense ranges of Montana and Wyoming. Their herds roamed in countless numbers over hills and valleys and went pouring in steady streams into the markets of the East. Despite the inducements of the National Government for the settlement of these Territories, the arrogant cattle-barons made life burdensome for the pioneer homesteader, and more than one, after locating a claim, disappeared from the stage of action and was heard of no more.

But, notwithstanding these facts, the land-hunters continued to invade the self-possessed domains of the big ranchmen and in the course of time they gained a footing on the ranges, and, in a small way, became horse and cattle raisers themselves, much to the annoyance of the "barons."

Naturally enough, a feeling of animosity grew up among their rival interests, and every effort was made by the big companies to force the homestead ranchmen from the country, and the latter, consequently, became all the more determined to remain.

This rivalry of the ranchmen proved a golden opportunity for the rustlers—thieves who infested the mountain fastnesses and preyed alike upon both interests.

The result of this wholesale stealing of cattle and horses widened the breach between the baron and the homesteader. The latter were openly, yet wrongfully, accused of being in league with the thieving rustlers.

To purge themselves of this charge, as well as to defend their personal interests, a score of ranchmen met one day at the Rosebud Ranch, owned by Captain David Adamson, to devise ways and means by which those things could be successfully accomplished.

An earnest denial of being in collusion with the rustlers, directly or indirectly, was drawn up, signed and published to the world. Furthermore, at that meeting, they decided to organize a party of mounted patrolmen to ride the range and hunt down the rustlers.

In one week's time the company was organized. It was composed of but six men, or, I might say, boys, for there was not one of the six over twenty-two years of age. But every one of them was selected with regard to his fitness for the dangers and hardships of the work and his knowledge of the hills and plains.

And this is the roster of the little band:

Ralph Kirkman, twenty-two, noted for skill as a horseman, rifle and pistol-shot, and withal, for courage, uncompromising honesty and sturdy manhood.

Joe Randolph and Tom Morgan, youths of twenty, and Billy Myers, eighteen.

Peter Anderson, a young Swede, of twenty years, with the physique of a young giant, brave as a lion and a jolly, good-natured fellow.

And last, but not least, George Washington Bee, better known as "Buzzy,"—a coal-black dandy of twenty years, a fearless horseman, a fine shot, and in some respects the most sagacious and far-sighted of the entire party.

Ralph Kirkman was selected by his comrades as captain of the little band, with permission to recruit his ranks whenever deemed necessary for the good of those interested.

All were armed and equipped with the best-style weapons, and provided with the best horses.

On the day they left for the range all met at Rosebud Ranch, and in the parlor of Captain Adamson's home received their instructions from the ranchman.

"Boys," the captain said, "you, of course, are aware of the responsibilities, the hardships you have assumed in entering upon the duty of range patrols. Those you are to watch have no regard for human life or human rights. You must be prudent, vigilant and alert. The Rustlers of Jackson Basin are a well-organized band. With these robbers especially you will have to contend. Do not attempt to enter the

Basin, for that would be sure death to five times your number. The notorious Lurid Bill has sentinels at every point of ingress and egress. But, watch the hills and passes lying east of the Basin, and every redskin, and every white man you find coming from direction of Jackson Basin arrest; and if you should catch them in the act of stealing from the range, deal with them as they deserve."

When the ranchman had concluded his instructions, his daughter, Mollie, a beautiful girl of seventeen, came into the room, her face wearing a smile, and her dark-blue eyes sparkling with the geniality of a lovable womanhood. She had in hand six small packages, and approaching the young patrol, she said:

"Boys, I want to make a request of you. Perhaps you will find it difficult to comply, but, if you can, it will be gratifying to me, at least."

"That," said Captain Kirkman, who looked upon Mollie with no little favor, "will be worth the effort certainly. If it is possible for us to comply with your wish we will do so."

"Thank you! My desire is that each of you keep a diary of your experiences—a brief record of what you see, and hear, and do, and that I may be permitted to read them when you return. Much of the time you may be separated, and one see and hear things the others do not. From those daily records I hope to gain a precise knowledge of the perils and incidents of life on the range. I'm going to write a little book, and so wish to be well informed."

"Good! good!" exclaimed the boys, in unison.

Mollie then gave each of them a new diary, which the recipient carefully stowed away in an inner breast pocket as though it were a priceless treasure.

Ten minutes later the young patrolmen were in their saddles ridgeway toward the south.

From the porch Mollie and her father watched them out of sight, and then reëntering the house, the old ranchman said:

"My daughter, that diary business, it seems to me, is a little scheme of yours that means more than data for a book."

Mollie glanced sharply at her father and then breaking into a little laugh said:

"You must be a mind-reader, father; but—well, time will determine all."

"To be sure, Mollie," assented the father, but, in her slight agitation and laughing evasion, he surmised that more was implied than he could then divine.

CHAPTER II.

A RIDE FOR LIFE.

ON a little eminence—a spur of a Montana mountain range—within the shadows of a cluster of scrub-pines, stood a man gazing through a field-glass out over the prairie-range that rolled away from the foot of the hill on which he stood, toward the east. He was a young man, clad in the garb of the range and armed with rifle and revolver.

It was Ralph Kirkman, the leader of the little band of Range Patrols. Just back of him stood his horse with blanket, gum coat and lariat upon the saddle.

He was alone. Three weeks had passed since the band had left Rosebud Ranch. The September sun hung half down the western sky. The air was soft and slumberous and stole lazily through the pines. Not a wing was astir; not a traveler in sight on all that vast plain.

To young Kirkman the silence seemed foreboding, and when, at length, a dark object—a mere speck—was limned against the eastern skyline, an expression of relief lit up his bronzed face.

Through his glass he scanned the object for several moments.

"It's a horseman," he finally said, to himself, lowering the glass, "and he's riding as if the Old Harry was after him."

Again he raised his glass, and then a cry escaped his lips, for half a dozen horsemen now appeared in sight, riding furiously after the first!

At least two of the pursuers were Indians, but more startling, was the discovery that the pursued rider was a woman.

In a moment Ralph was in saddle. Riding to the edge of the thicket he took another look through his glass at the fleeing woman.

"I'd give my year's wages if the boys were here now!" Ralph's thought's took words, "but I must do my best. Whoever the woman may be, she shall not be taken by that gang, whoever they may be."

He rode down the hill and out of the timber into the prairie and then dashed away.

His horse, fresh and swift, swept the level expanse like a deer. The distance between him and the fugitive rapidly diminished, and, they neared each other, Ralph waved his hat to assure her that he was a friend, and, as she came nearer he swung out to the right and circling around came in alongside of her, checking the speed of his horse to the slower gait of the fugitive's panting and almost exhausted mount.

As he dashed alongside and glanced at the woman's white face, a cry of surprise and astonishment burst from his lips.

The fugitive was Mollie Adamson, the daughter of the Rosebud Ranchman!

"Great heavens! Mollie Adamson! What does this mean?"

The brave little girl, now that a friend was near, glanced back over her shoulder at her pursuers and answered:

"It means that I have got myself into danger, Ralph; but how glad I am you have come!"

"Would to God the other boys were within twenty miles of us!" Ralph exclaimed; "this race then would be in another direction. They're a gang of Jackson Hole cut-throats, I see."

"They've been gaining steadily on me ever since I jumped my horse over Groan Creek. The noble brute sprained himself in the leap and I can see is growing lame, and fast failing!"

Ralph saw that she spoke the truth, and the discovery filled his mind with apprehension. He knew the animal could never carry her to safety. They were forty miles from Rosebud Ranch and a good twenty from the ranch of the homesteader on Groan Creek.

No less than a dozen of the pursuers were now strung across the plain, the majority of them riding together and momentarily gaining. The odds were too great to risk a fight, and the young patrol knew there was but one chance for Mollie, and this he resolved to improve.

Straight toward the point whence he had debouched from the wooded foot-hills he directed their course. But, Mollie's horse grew so lame that it fell when less than a hundred yards from the timber. Mollie was thrown from the saddle by the fall but not injured.

Leaping to the ground, instantly, Kirkman stripped off his own saddle and as quickly replaced it with Mollie's saddle, saying, as he did so:

"Now, Miss Mollie, mount my horse and go on—go northward and swing in toward Shafer's Ranch. The murderous hounds can never overtake you on that horse. Only maintain your splendid courage, Mollie, and trust in God!"

As he thus spoke he lifted and seated her in the saddle.

"But, Ralph, what will you do?" the girl anxiously asked.

"Never mind me, Mollie," he answered; "I will find safety among these wooded hills where it would be impossible to take you. Now off! Don't delay a moment more!"

Bidding him good-by, Mollie rode away at full speed, not only for her own safety but to bring help to the brave young patrol.

The pursuers by this time were not over forty rods away, and, as they saw she girl ride off they uttered a fierce yell that was answered by shot after shot from Ralph's fine Winchester rifle, and he had the satisfaction of seeing one of the ruffian's horses turn a complete somersault, throwing his rider so violently to the earth that he did not rise again.

This caused the outlaws to draw rein, but only for a few brief moments, which Ralph improved in gaining the cover of the woods.

When the rustlers resumed the pursuit they divided their force, four going on after Mollie while the other three, two of them Indians, started to run down Ralph Kirkman.

CHAPTER III.

A QUEER OLD CUSTOMER.

RALPH KIRKMAN had no difficulty in eluding the rustler gang. He pushed northward in the hills, and when the sun went down and darkness fell, he still pressed on to reach Pine Hollow, where the band was to meet that night.

It was a long run to make on foot, but the young patrol, with seeming tireless footsteps, made his way on.

It was nearing morning when he entered a densely-wooded valley between two ranges of rugged hills. Cautiously making his way up the valley, in the twilight, he suddenly caught the glimmer of a light through the woods ahead. His heart gave a leap of joy, for he knew the light was in the camp of his friends who were early astir. A few minutes later he stood in their midst.

Boys greeted their young captain with a burst of joy not unmingled with apprehension. They had waited and watched for his coming all night, and his late arrival, his coming on foot, and his haggard face told that something had gone wrong.

That such was really the case, they soon learned from Ralph's lips, as he told them of his adventures and Mollie Andamson's run for life.

"What on earth could she have been doing away down there?" questioned Joe Randolph.

"I don't know," replied Captain Ralph; "I had no time to ask her a single question, but I mistrust she was down at the Shafer homestead on a visit, and, while taking one of her daily rides, was discovered and pursued by the outlaws that have come over from the Basin despite our vigilance. But, boys, I do not know whether she escaped the marauders or not; if she kept her head and her bearings, her horse would do the rest. It is our duty, however, to make sure she is safe, and to lose no time in doing so."

"Then I'll hurry up breakfast," and Buzzy, the colored youth who officiated as cook, bustled around the fire.

"And I'll see that the horses are—"

"Achew! A-chew!"

"What in wonder was that?" exclaimed Joe Randolph, whose speech had been so suddenly cut short by a peculiar, explosive sound as if of some one sneezing.

The young patrols gazed quickly around them. Day was breaking—in fact, it was almost broad daylight.

"Well, what in wonder was it, indeed?" Billy Myers repeated, gazing from one to the other of his companions.

"I'll inform you what it was if I come down there!" was the startling answer that came from the boughs directly overhead.

Instantly six faces were lifted upward, and six pairs of bulging eyes fixed upon an object that fairly astonished the young patrolmen! And yet, it was nothing more nor less than a comical, human face—the face of an old man who was looking down upon them. He was stretched out in a hammock made of blankets, whose four corners were tied to two convenient limbs of the tree, and was directly over the camp-fire of the Boy Patrols.

"Ogres of horror-land!" exclaimed young Myers, "what have we treed?"

"Name it," answered Pete Anderson, the Swede, "and you may haf the ole thang."

"A bull tree-frog!" declared Joe Randolph.

"Begobs!" added Tom Morgan, the Hibernian, "and by the saints, it's an ould jackass birrid widde wool ave a goat on his head. B'ys, shill I ruffle his feathers in hees nest?" and Tom raised his rifle, apparently in dead earnest.

"Look a-here, bogtrotter," called out the old unknown from his gently swaying perch, "you go a little slow down there with that iron, or you'll get the brogue all mauled out o' your system. It's a sweet, melodious how-de-do when an innocent pilgrim on the way to Jericho can't top off his mornin' sleep on account o' a brood o' young robbers. Smarties, that smoke ascended here and sot me to sneezin', and woke me up."

"Well, suppose you come down, stranger, and let us take a look at you," suggested Captain Kirkman.

"I'll do it," answered the old sneezer, "and I don't care if I do take breakfast with you, either, for the odor o' that broiling meat, and the roma o' your coffee creates a desirous want inside my bosom."

The old man-of-the-treetop crawled from his blanket, poised himself on a limb, unfastened his hammock and dropped it to the ground. Then, with an agility remarkable for one of his apparent years, he descended from the tree to the ground, stretched himself and yawned drowsily.

A smile was upon the faces of all the Boy Patrols.

The old codger must have been five-and-sixty years of age. He was tall, slender and angular, with a thin beard and unkempt iron-gray hair. He was clad in the well-worn remnants of suits of various colors. A cap a size or two too large hung carelessly upon his head, the peak behind.

Altogether he had the dress and air of a veritable old tramp; but, why such a person should be there, passed the comprehension of the young range-scouts.

"Here, now!" he exclaimed, as he straightened up his six-foot form before the boys, "look at me—take a good, square look and when we meet ag'in I hope you'll know me—know Ole Tim Glory—Treetop Tim Glory, the same which I be and am."

"Never heard the name before," declared Joe Randolph.

"Didn't, eh?" exclaimed the old man, sarcastically; "did you ever hear o' one George Washington? or Christopher Columbus? or Joan o' Arkansaw? or Belzebubb?"

"Oh, yes; but not of Treetop Tim Glory," answered Kirkman. "Where do you hail from, Timothy? and whither bound?"

"From Whooper-Up Minin'-Camp in Knock-Down Gulch over fernenst the Yallerstun Park, and on my way to the refinement and luxury o' civilization down in the Moonshine deestrics o' ole Kentucky."

"You have evidently seen hard times, Timothy," Billy Myers observed.

"And Whooper-Up left without change of raiment, bag or baggage," suggested young Randolph.

"That's exactly the size o' it, my freckled-face cow-puncher," asseverated the old man, scowling fiercely upon Joe. "I left suddintly—didn't have to be invited. There was a woman in the case as there alers—"

"A woman?" iterated Pete, the Swede, his eyes sparkling and a smile on his big face.

"Yes, a woman! a female woman, Mr. Scandalnavian," retorted Old Tim. "The fact is the little heifer had too many lovers. I war one o' them. Me and t'other one come together. Then she had but one, and him war me; but now, she hasn't airy solitary one, for with lofty disdain I left her loverless, and to save their excited souls, the committee app'inted to banquet me couldn't overtake me."

"The Vigilante Committee, you mean," put in Tom Morgan.

"I did, did I, smarty? Mebbe you know more 'bout that love affair than the survivin' lover? You want to have some sport with me, don't you? You take me for an original vagabone, don't you? Be careful, bogtrot, and don't step on an elephant's tail. But, look here, boys: let's have breakfast; I'm holler from sunshade to sandals and need no urgin'. I'm not back-wards, a bit. I like to be social and alers eat hearty."

The little party sat down to a breakfast of broiled venison, hard-tack and coffee, Old Treetop sharing the meal with them.

Notwithstanding the old fellow's uncouth appearance, and whimsical talk, there was something about him that appealed to their better nature as well as curiosity.

During the repast the young patrolmen discussed the situation. That the mounted ruffians who pursued Mollie Anderson were Jackson Basin outlaws there was no doubt.

The only way to ascertain whether Mollie was safe was to go directly to the ranch; and just what course they should pursue, in case they found the girl safe, they did not care to discuss in hearing of the old stranger. But, as soon as they had finished eating, Joe Randolph was left to entertain their guest, while the other five retired toward the northern side of the valley to discuss their plan of action.

A smile was seen to pass over Treetop's face as the five young men withdrew, and Joe Randolph was not a little puzzled by it.

The two sat down and entered into a conversation. Old Treetop was more inclined to ask questions than to answer them, and this fact made Joe a little cautious. Suddenly, however, both were startled by the heavy tramp of feet, and, looking around, they saw two men emerge from the bushes south of the camp and walk toward them. Both were rough, bearded fellows, one of them a heavy-set, dark-faced man, whose very countenance bespoke the desperado. They were armed like arsenals, and as they stopped, suddenly confronting Joe and Old Treetop Tim, their hands dropped to their belts as though they had been surprised by the presence of the old man and young patrol.

"Wal, what in the nation have we struck?" exclaimed the burly stranger, glaring at the two men.

"A pair o' youngsters, stranger," answered Tim, rising to his feet, with apparent indifference to the other's presence; "we're a pair o' colts, frolicsome and free."

"A pretty pair, too—mavericks, I reckon," said the intruder. "What you doin' here?"

"Rusticatin'—absorb'in' mountain air for our health," confessed Treetop; "but, say, who might you be?"

"Did you ever hear o' Range Police?" asked the burly intruder.

"Scadoots o' times," replied Old Tim; "be you a pair o' them fellers?"

"That's what we are; and we have orders to disarm and drive off the range and out of the hills every hunter and tramp that we find tres-

passing within the domains of the great cattle companies. You fellows will hand over at once any and all weapons you may have about you."

"You don't mean it, pard!" ejaculated Old Tim, half-sneeringly.

"I do, and I mean to be obeyed," retorted the self-proclaimed patrol, advancing a step or two, his hand on his revolver.

"Stop! stop!" cried the old man, raising his hands and backing away.

Joe Randolph, startled by the old man's voice, glanced at his face, and but for his rags he would have sworn that another man stood in Treetop's place. The form and face of the old vagabond seemed to have been suddenly transformed. He stood erect, gray eyes flashing and visage the very picture of undaunted courage.

The desperado himself hesitated to advance, as if awed by the sudden change in the old man's demeanor.

Joe Randolph was completely at his wits' end. He glanced at the ruffian, at Old Tim and in the direction his friends had gone. He mentally prayed the boys might return, but, instead of his prayers being answered, four more ruffianly-looking men came from the bushes and stopped by the side of their confederates.

"You see," the burly leader said, "I am prepared to enforce my demands. Hand over your weapons!"

"Stranger," assumed Old Tim in an impassioned voice, stretching his long arm out and pointing his long finger straight at the man, "you have no legal nor moral right to disarm us. We are trespassin' on no man's claims or possessions, and we're ready to run or fight."

"Old fellow," retorted the ruffian, in a tone calculated to preclude further argument, "you're foolin' with dynamite. I am Black Bill Bates, of Jackson Basin, and these are my men. You surely know what that means!"

The last of Black Bill's sentence was delivered with the vicious emphasis of a brigand, but even as he spoke, Ralph Kirkman and his companions appeared upon the scene and aligned themselves alongside Treetop Tim and Joe Randolph.

"Black Bill Bates, if you be the scoundrel, let me tell you that you've run up ag'inst a litter o' lurid wild-cats!" was Old Tim's retort, again extending his arm, but, this time, with a cocked revolver in his hand pointing at the face of the outlaw; "and to be plain with you"—he went on—"I am Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective, and you know what that means!"

CHAPTER IV.

BLACK BILL BATES BEATEN.

THE name of Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective, was not unknown to Black Bill Bates, the second in command of the Jackson Basin outlaws, and was familiar to the Boy Patrol. All had heard of his fearless nerve, his remarkable sagacity, and his eccentricities! and now, in the blazing eye, the firm jaws, the rigid form, and steady hand grasping the revolver that had been fished so suddenly from the depths of his seedy garments, the burly outlaw realized that the rags of the tramp could not hide the real character of the dangerous detective.

Bill involuntarily recoiled before the old detective's gaze, which was no less threatening than his cocked revolver; nor did one of his followers attempt to draw a weapon, so completely were they paralyzed for the moment by Bandy's attitude and the sudden appearance of the Boy Patrols.

"Scoundrel!" Black Bill finally found tongue to say, but not with his usual bravado, "do you for a moment think you can defy me, or intimidate me? Do you forget who I am and whom I represent?"

"Pouff! It is you and the men you represent that I am after!" retorted Kit Bandy, "and I demand that you surrender if you don't want to die right here, in the early morning. These fellows are my Big Six, and every one o' them a Greek, and—"

"Count me in if it's to be a shoot!" suddenly piped out a voice from the woods back of Bandy and his friends, and the next moment a little old man with a face smooth as a woman's, a little bundle on his back, and a pistol in hand came up and took a position facing the outlaws.

But, at the sound of his voice Kit Bandy never moved a muscle, but continued his searching gaze at the outlaw, and his speech:

"And here," he added as the little old man came up, "is my pard, Ichabod Flea. He's death itself, so it's no use now, Black William, for you to kick. There isn't enough o' you folks to go around, so—ah-ha!"

Bang!

It was the crash of Old Kit's revolver. An outlaw standing just behind Black Bill, and partially screened by his chief's body, attempted to draw his revolver and shoot Bandy. But, Old Kit was all eyes. He seemed to be watching the movements of the entire gang, and by the slightest deflection of his revolver, he had put a bullet through the ruffian's shoulder.

The bullet did double duty, for it plowed a furrow across Bill's hairy cheek and instantly sent the proclaimed terror with a frantic curse upon his lips, back into the bushes.

This first blow was followed by a retrograde movement of the outlaw's followers, but, as they stepped back, they drew their revolvers and opened fire, or rather attempted to return the broadside that the Boy Patrols and Ichabod Flea poured into them.

There were shots enough exchanged and noise enough created to have killed a hundred men, but, as evidence of the uncertainty of death in an exciting battle, where men's nerves are strung to such a tension as to preclude deliberate aim, but one of the robbers was killed, and Billy Myers of the Patrols wounded. Just how many of the Rustlers were wounded could not be told for they made a hasty retreat and sought the friendly cover of trees. From this position they endeavored to continue the fight and began popping away with their revolvers at a lively rate.

So uncomfortably near did some of the bullets whistle that Bandy and his friends deemed it prudent to take to the cover of trees, also.

The Rustlers then soon found out that their revolvers were no match for the Winchesters of the Patrols, and at once made an inglorious retreat up the valley, leaving their dead comrade on the field.

The Boy Patrols would have followed the robbers but Bandy advised them not to for fear of an ambush.

"They've got enough," he said, "to last 'em back to Jackson Hole, for I think 'bout half o' them's wounded. By the ram's-horn o' Joshua didn't Black Billiam get fooled? Didn't he butt up 'g'inst a stone wall? Didn't he drap back when Kit Bandy put on his stormy-sky frown? Didn't he spin into the bushes graciously when my popper popped? Didn't them bullets sound musical? Didn't—but say, boys, here's my pard, Ichabod Flea; he slept in a tree down the valley. He's a little ripper—comes late for dinner and battle, but alers in the nick o' time."

The boys greeted Ichabod with a cordial handshake and found him a very genial and lively little old fellow.

"But the strangest thing of all," said Ralph Kirkman, "is that Treetop Tim should be transformed into the redoubtable Old Kit Bandy."

"By the horn o' Joshua!" averred Old Kit, "it didn't take much argument to convince bully Bill Bates, the roarin' tiger from Jackson Basin, that Treetop Tim Glory war loaded for Grizzly b'ar."

Billy Myers's wounded arm was dressed by Ichabod Flea, who had lost none of his skill as a surgeon. The young patrol was not seriously hurt, but Flea decided that he would be unable to take further part in proceedings for some time to come, and advised him to return at once to the Rosebud, where he could receive proper treatment and nursing.

Old Kit and Ralph Kirkman took possession of the dead rustler's private arsenal and searched the body for something by which to identify him.

Matters having thus been straightened up about camp, Ralph Kirkman concluded to make a reconnaissance up the valley to ascertain whether the outlaws had departed or were preparing for another assault.

He left his friends, promising to be back in an hour. He crossed the valley, and, keeping close in along the base of the bluff, moved cautiously up the valley. He soon came to where the bluff became rocky and almost perpendicular, and in places ledges of stone pushed out abruptly from the wall and hung threateningly over the deer-path that wound along the base and in which Ralph was walking.

Finally he reached a spot where one of those ledges had broken from the face of the cliff and lay in a great body in the valley. Between this dislodged mass and the bluff ran the deer-path. The way was narrow and perhaps ten steps in length. The broken ledge was at least seven feet high and straight up and down next the bluff. Its top was overlaid with a mass of creeping vines.

Into this narrow way Ralph walked. He was nearly half-way through when he was suddenly confronted by the tall, slender figure of a man

who held a cocked revolver full in his face, and commanded:

"Captain Kirkman, stand! your days as a Range Patrol are numbered!"

CHAPTER V.

A SUDDEN CHANGE IN THE SITUATION.

RALPH KIRKMAN recognized the man before him as one Kris Loafman, a rancher whom he had met in Wyoming a year or two previous.

That he was now a Rustler, and a member of the Jackson Basin gang, there was no doubt.

The Patrol expected no mercy from the villain, for Loafman was, when he knew him, one of those to whom outlawry was the merest "business."

"Kris Loafman," the young Patrol exclaimed, "have you turned outlaw-murderer?"

"Throw up your hands, Captain Kirkman!" was the only response, "and don't dally 'bout it. Your gang got the drop on Black Bill, but it's my turn—"

The fellow's words were here cut short by a most singular and sudden interposition. A human hand, thrust from the vine-clad top of the broken ledge, snatched the villain's revolver from his grasp! It was done so deftly that, as the astounded Rustler's eyes followed his weapon he was fairly paralyzed with terror to find himself gazing into its muzzle, to see it grasped in a firm hand, back of which he beheld a pair of flashing eyes set in a boyish face!

"It's my turn now!" came from the unknown, who lay prone upon the rock, his body wholly concealed by the vines.

The outlaw stood motionless, fear depicted on every lineament of his face. To be thwarted in the moment of victory was bad enough, but, to have his revolver deliberately snatched from his fingers and thrust into his very face was a crusher for the boastful renegade.

As a matter of fact, Ralph Kirkman, himself was astounded by the performance.

The truth, however, soon dawned upon the mind of the Rustler, and quickly throwing up his hand he attempted to strike the weapon aside. But, as the hand flew upward the pistol rung out and, with a cry, the renegade-rancher recoiled, staggered forward against the rock and then reeled away, out of the narrow passage, glancing back over his broken shoulder like a hunted wolf, his eyes glaring, his teeth hard set.

The unknown upon the rock now arose to his feet, the smoking revolver in his hand. He glanced after the retreating Rustler—watched him until he had staggered from sight around a point of rocks, then turning, he gazed down upon the astonished young Patrolman, a smile of triumph upon his face, saying:

"Stranger, he brought you up standing; but he's on the retired list now with a sore shoulder."

Young Kirkman was as much surprised at his deliverer's calm and unaffected manner of speech as he had been at his daring performance, and for a moment was at a loss for words to respond. The unknown was a youth of perhaps twenty years, with the slender, graceful figure, the symmetrical features and short curling locks of a Greek athlete.

"Well, stranger," Ralph found words to respond, "I must confess that you have somewhat confused me."

The new-comer laughed softly, dropped his lithe form to the ground, saying:

"Events did crowd on you with confusion rapidly for 'bout a holy minute, and it was a miraculous good thing that I war on that rock, and that the Rustler stopped where he did."

"Well, sir," responded Ralph, himself again, "I am everlastingly obliged to you, for I was in a narrow strait. My name is Ralph Kirkman, and I have a party of friends, including Old Kit Bandy, down the valley a mile or so, and—"

"Old Kit Bandy in these diggin's?" broke in the young mountaineer, for such his garb denoted, his handsome face lighting up with an expression of delight.

"Yes, Kit's in this valley," answered Ralph. "You know him?"

"Know him! Well, I should remark!" emphasized the youth. "Ralph Kirkman, my name is Runkells—Jove Runkells. Lead me forth to the presence of Kit Bandy, the Great!"

Ralph turned, and together the two hastened into camp. As they approached Old Kit, Jove Runkells dashed forward and grasped the old detective by the hand, exclaiming:

"Kit Columbus Bandy! How are you, my dear old friend?"

Bandy gazed for a moment in silence at the beaming face of the boy athlete; then, as a flash of recognition lit up his grizzled face, he claimed:

"Little Jove, the Boy Thunderbolt! by the horn o' Joshua! All hail to thee, my gallant friend! The Lord has kept you well since we campaigned in Colorado two years ago! Well, I'm delighted—rejoiced! Boys"—turning to the young Patrols—"come, wag the fist o' my twin-brother, Little Jove, a veritable human thunderbolt o' the mountains!"

One by one the old detective's new-found comrades shook the hand of Little Jove, and as soon as Old Kit's exuberance could be suppressed, Ralph told the story of his meeting with the young mountaineer.

"That's just the kind o' lark he is!" declared Bandy. "Jove has the heaven-born faculty o' bobbin' up somewhar, and always he bobs at the right time and place. But say, Jove, what are you doing over here, anyhow?"

"Layin' for Rustlers!" expounded Jove; "and that reminds me, folks, that I've got a horse over here in the hills which I robbed a band o' Rustlers of last night over in the mountain pass. I left the animal concealed and drifted down into this valley to inquire into a racket I heard that sounded a mighty sight like a Kit Bandy fight. The horse is a dark sorrel, medium-sized, with one white hind foot and a star in the forehead."

"That's the description of my horse exactly!" exclaimed Ralph Kirkman.

"But it couldn't be yours, for it had a side-saddle—a woman's saddle on its back."

"A side saddle? My God!" cried Ralph, "then it was my horse, and Mollie Adamson, after all, is in the power of the Jackson Basin outlaws!"

CHAPTER V.

OFF FOR JACKSON BASIN.

EXCITEMENT reigned in the camp of the Range Patrols.

That Mollie Adamson was a captive there was not a doubt; but, to make assurance doubly sure, Jove and Ralph proceeded to where the young Thunderbolt had left the horse.

They were gone about two hours, returning with the animal. It was Kirkman's horse, and Mollie's saddle was upon its back!

"That settles it," said Joe Randolph.

"And our duty is plain. The girl must be rescued," added Old Kit; "but, Jove, didn't you see anything of the gal? How did you come by the horse?"

"I'll tell you," explained the Thunderbolt. "I heard horses' hoots coming toward me up the narrow pass. I hid in the bushes. A cavalcade of eight or ten white men and Ingins, riding Ingin file, came in sight. The foremost rider carried in his arms a burden wrapped in a blanket. I spooed at the time it was a sick or wounded companion they were totin' home. But, it must have been the rancher's girl. The hindmost feller war leadin' that horse with the side-saddle. I was afoot. I had no horse and they had one more than they needed. I concluded I'd have that one. I didn't want to shoot the feller leading the horse and raise a racket that'd bring the hull gang onto me, so I slugged him. You remember, Kit, how I used to fling dornicks, don't you? Well, my arm has not lost its cunning. At fifteen to twenty paces I can land a stone in a circle the size of a man's face, ten times out of half a score. So I fetched that outlaw one right plump between the eyes that fairly lifted him out of the saddle. In falling, the horse he rode made a frightened jump forward, but the one he led went backward. A little excitement followed, of course. The fellow I dropped groaned; the outlaws began to call to each other and swear, and while they were thus occupied I slipped along, seized the reins of this horse, jumped into the saddle and was soon flying eastward. The Rustlers chased me for miles; this was a noble beast; and I finally dodged into a side canyon and give them the slip. I am sorry I didn't know it was a girl that feller had in his arms, for then she'd never been taken into Jackson Basin alive; just that or else I'd gone under."

"Boys, you can count on Kit Bandy and pard to assist you in whatever you decide upon doin'," Old Kit observed.

"And here, too," added Little Jove. "Good!" exclaimed Ralph Kirkman, "we will follow the villains to their den. Kit Bandy, you shall be our leader!"

"That's it! hurrah!" shouted the others. "Lead on, Captain Bandy, and we will fol-

Jove. "Your leadership will be the success of a mighty lively campaign." "Yes, boys," said Old Kit, seriously, "it will be no pleasure excursion into Jackson Basin, and every man that goes in there takes his life in his hand. Jackson Basin war made exclusively for the seclusion of robbers. I am told it is a Death's Valley for them as have undertaken to explore it and hunt down the thieves hiding there with hundreds of stolen horses and cattle. Every approach, it seems, is guarded. The civil authorities have been baffled in every attempt to bring the scoundrels to justice, and the government authorities don't seem to care. The ill-feeling existin' between the cattle-barons and the homestead ranchers is bein' taken advantage of by the Rustlers, with whom the barons are tryin' awful hard to implicate the homesteaders."

"We are aware of that fact," averred Ralph Kirkman, "and it was to prove the falsity of the accusation and to protect the interests of all concerned that our band was organized and sent into the field. But, now, until Miss Mollie is rescued, the range will have to take care of itself. From this on we are Bandy's Boy Brigade, and our destination Jackson Basin. But, boys, our horses will have to be abandoned, I suppose."

"Yes, indeed," answered Old Kit; "we don't want to go clatterin' and jinglin' into that devil's den on horses. We want to slip in on tip-toe—like a shadow."

After some discussion it was decided to send the wounded Patrol, Billy Myers, with the horses back to the nearest ranch, for it would be impossible, much to Myers's regret, for him to go on the perilous expedition.

So the youth was at once started on his homeward journey, leading his companions' horses that were tied one behind another.

Then Kit Bandy and his Select Six—his Big Six, as he jovially termed them—turned their faces mountainward and set off for Jackson Basin, determined to beard the mountain lions in their lair.

CHAPTER VI.

KIT AND JOVE MAKE A DISCOVERY.

"HARKEE, lad! harkee! Lie low, open your ears and shove your eyesight 'round and about us!"

The speaker, Old Kit Bandy, thus addressed Jove Runkells, the Young Mountain Thunderbolt.

It was early morn, four days after that upon which Kit and his band had set off for Jackson Basin. The sun had just risen over the eastern range of hills, flooding the land of the lawless with light and dispelling the gloom under cover of which Bandy and his Big Six had penetrated almost to the heart of the notorious retreat of the Rustlers.

Leaving the main party in the seclusion of a ravine, Kit and Jove had gone out on a reconnaissance, and had advanced to the foot of Kit named Castle Butte.

From the northern extremity of the Basin a long range of wooded hills trended southward, terminating in a great peak that rose high above the level of the range. On the summit of this peak were rock formations which, at a distance looked like the ruins of a mighty castle, hence the name that Bandy gave it. A dense growth of pine and cedar trees and undergrowth covered the butte almost to its very top.

At the base of this peak, on the banks of a little brawling stream, Bandy and Jove lay concealed among the bushes in the early dawn, and it was the sound of hoof-strokes coming down from the wooded hillside that called forth his words of warning.

Lying low, they listened and watched.

A man of thirty, leading a horse, across the back of which were hung two casks, suddenly appeared in sight.

"By the horn o' Joshua!" Bandy exclaimed in a whisper, "we did see a light on the butte last night, and that feller has come down from its whereabouts. He's a water-carrier for some place that's high and dry."

"That's exactly what the bullcat is," responded Little Jove, "and tells us that a rustlers' roost is not far away."

"Some'ers up on the side o' that dome," added Old Kit, "and it must be a relay, or a lookout station, or it might be the headquarters of Captain Lurid himself. Whichever it is, the gal, Mollie Adamson, may be there; and if we find she is, we'll make the side o' that butte lurid. See! the fellow's goin' to fill his cask at the creek."

"Holy mist! Wouldn't I like to sock a dornick through one of them casks when he gits it filled just to see the water squirt and hear the Rustler rustle!" exclaimed Jove.

"Hold your thunderbolts, boy!" warned the old detective; "we are goin' to find somethin' before long that promises haydoogins o' fun, and then you can bolt yer thunderbolts."

"Do you really suppose, Kit, our entrance to this Basin has been discovered yet?" Jove questioned.

"No; I think we made a beautiful sneak into this valley, and if we'll jist hold the bits in our coltish mouths, lay low and go slow, we'll be able to give the Rustlers as magnificent a surprise as war ever dreamed of since Adam was a pappoose in his mother's bark wickiup. So we'll camp on this water-peddler's trail till we see where he brings up."

They watched the man fill the casks, sling them across the horse and then start back up the butte.

"Now's our time to do the sneak act," whispered Old Kit, rising to his feet; "but however great the temptation for you to throw a stone, don't do it!"

"I'll try and manage myself, uncle," assured Jove, with a smile, as the two crept from their covert and began ascending the butte, keeping the water-carrier in sight.

The ascent was in places steep and rough, but by following a well-defined though crooked path the water-carrier proceeded without difficulty, and finally landed upon a terrace. But, on he went, following along the base of the bluff a few rods to again strike the path leading up the butte.

Another bench or terrace was reached, crossed, and the third ascent continued.

The scouts looking behind them could now see out over the Basin toward the east, and had no difficulty in locating the ravine where they had left the Big Six, five miles away.

At length a third bench was reached, across which the scouts were following the water-carrier when they were suddenly brought to a halt on the edge of an opening into which the man and horse had passed. Here they made a discovery that well rewarded them for their labor.

From the eastern side of the terrace back to the bluff it must have been two hundred paces. The opening ran the full length, narrowing from the bluff—where it was some eight rods wide—toward the east end. At the bluff end of the opening stood a long, low log house, or cabin, whose front and roof were overrun with vines which almost concealed the domicile from view.

The clearing evidently had been made by the hand of man. It was level and smooth, but devoid of grass or vegetation of any kind.

Up to the very edge of the clearing the undergrowth of the timber was a dense mass of low pines and other bushes, through which it seemed as if only a coyote could creep.

"Behold!" said Old Kit, as his eyes rested upon the cabin, "the retreat of the Rustlers!"

"There don't 'pear to be many 'bout there," Little Jove added.

"Boy, did you ever see many hornets 'bout a nest till you poked it up? That's exactly the way with a robbers' nest. Fire a pistol and you'd see the bearded, bleary-eyed boogers—haydoogins o' them—come swarmin' from every direction above and below and around and about."

The water-carrier drew up in front of the cabin, and having deposited his casks on the ground, led his horse away and disappeared in the woods on the opposite side of the Plaza.

On hands and knees Old Kit and Jove slowly worked through the bushes to a point within thirty paces of the cabin, and there, lying along the ground like two lizards, they resolved to stay until they had ascertained the character of the people who dwelt in that cabin, and to secure any other information which could further their work.

So far they had seemingly been very fortunate: their presence in the Basin had not been discovered, although they had been there two days. Equally unfortunate were they in that they had been unable to find a single outlaw until they discovered the water-carrier, if outlaw he really was. Of this, however, there could be little doubt, and that the cabin was a station the Rustlers there was also small doubt in the mind of Kit Bandy.

The scouts had occupied their new position about ten minutes when they were somewhat diverted by sight of a woman who came bustling from the cabin in some haste. She was a low, heavy-set woman with a full, florid face and

frowny head. Her sleeves were rolled up above her elbows displaying a pair of big, red arms in which she snatched up one of the water casks and whisked back into the house as though it was a bag of feathers.

"Horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit, in bated breath, "wasn't that a solid ole block o' humanity, boy? Wasn't she a Cleopatra? Jove, we've beheld the Queen o' Jackson Basin!"

At this juncture the water-carrier came from the woods, and approaching the cabin called out, loud enough for the scouts to plainly hear:

"Lucille?"

"That's queen's name—Lucille," whispered Old Kit.

"Not much—look there!" exclaimed Jove, as he saw the graceful figure of a young woman emerge from the cabin and approach the man.

She could not have been over five-and-twenty years old, she had a tall, graceful form, dark hair and eyes, and, so far as the scouts could determine, she was decidedly handsome, well and tastily dressed.

"By the ram's horn o' Joshua! isn't she a honey-goslush?" Old Kit whispered.

"And perhaps as wicked as she is beautiful," suggested Jove.

"I'm glad Old Tom Rattler isn't in your place, boy. That pretty face 'd set the old fool crazy. Old Tom alers was a lofty old dunce 'bout a pretty woman. But, she vanishes!"

A few words had passed between the man and woman and then both disappeared in the cabin.

For quite a spell nothing more was seen of any of the three persons now known to be within the cabin; the scouts, however, held their position, Bandy declaring he must have another look at Lucille and "queen," before he left.

Their patience was finally rewarded by the appearance, not only of the dark-eyed Lucille, but a young girl of seventeen or eighteen summers, beside whom the beauty of Lucille was decidedly plain.

"A fairy, by jingrickas?" averred Jove, his eyes sparkling with admiration, "but I'll bet the earth all fenced that it's Mollie Adamson."

"Keep cool, boy!" admonished Old Kit; "don't git Old Tom Rattlered. I'll admit she's a hummin' little beauty, and I wonder how many o' sich are in that shebang?"

The two women walked arm in arm to and fro across the Plaza. If they conversed at all it was in inaudible tones. The younger woman walked with her eyes cast down, as if depressed in spirit, but the elder, walking erect like a queen, kept her eyes turned eastward most of the time as if expecting some one from that direction.

Finally the two sat down in front of the cabin and talked for some time. Kit and Jove strained every nerve to catch the drift of their conversation, but in vain. At length they arose and went in, Lucille casting another glance eastward over the Basin as she crossed the threshold.

"By the horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit Bandy in an undertone of affected regret, "the visions have vanished, and it makes every thing look bleak and desolate in that clearin'."

"They did help the appearance of the landscape, I'll confess," the Thunderbolt responded.

"Yes, but, boy," Old Kit continued advisedly, "don't let them pretty faces upsoot your equilibrium o' heart. Onc't I was a young man full of hope and promise, but in one evil hour I permitted Ellen Sabina Frisby to win my boyish heart and abduct me to the hyeneal alter, and now, alas! who am I? where am I? why am I? what am I?"

"An' infernal, ole liar! and if you move a muscle I'll splatter your head all over the side o' this knob!"

It was a strange yet stern voice that thus spoke through the bushes almost in Kit's ear. It was followed by a slight rustling of the branches, and turning his head to one side, the old detective found himself gazing into the black muzzle of a revolver held in a hand whose owner was thoroughly concealed behind the dense foliage.

CHAPTER VII.

HELIOGRAPH SIGNALING.

KIT BANDY was not slow to recognize his imminent peril. The muzzle of the unknown's revolver was within six inches of his head, and he could see that the assassin's finger was upon the trigger. Along the barrel, back in the bushes, he could discern a flaming eye glaring upon him; but more than this he could not distinguish.

Little Jove was fully aware of the danger of his friend, but, lying as he was on his stomach, he was powerless to help Bandy without changing his position so as to get hold of a revolver, and while doing this the other could shoot both of them.

The situation was not only dangerous but ludicrous as well, and Old Kit realized both conditions with a feeling of chagrin and humiliation. He was for once, at least, rendered speechless, and as if to still aggravate him more, the assassin, after a moment's silence said, in a hissing voice:

"You've made your last sneak, Kit Bandy, and told your last lie!"

Old Kit pricked up his ears, as it were, and there was a sudden start of his whole frame. He regained his powers of speech, and in a sort of a stage-whisper said:

"Say that over, will you, stranger?"

For an answer the unseen pushed aside the foliage, and through the opening thus made Kit Bandy beheld the smiling, triumphant face of that redoubtable old mountain tramp, Tom Rattler!

An assumed look of indignation, coupled with genuine joy and surprise, overspread the features of Bandy.

"By the roarin' ram's-horn o' Joshua!" he almost exclaimed aloud, "it's that miserable mountain vagrant, slippery Old Tom Rattler, as true as this old world's a-swing!"

The next moment the two old friends' hands were grasped in a hearty shake that made the bushes around them rustle and tremble.

Little Jove also crept around and greeted Old Tom, and then the three, with their heads close together, entered into low yet animated conversation.

"Thomas Rattler," said Bandy, "by what dispensation of Providence have you been sent prowlin' round here in Jackson Basin without a guardian?"

"The same dispensation, Kitsie," replied Tom, "that has so often guided me to your assistance—to keep you outen danger, and from makin' a great ole fool o' yourself 'bout some pretty woman, and from tellin' that ole, prehistoric lie 'bout you bein' led to the hyeneal alter. I saw you war struck on them female weemin, and I concluded to skeer you outen a year's growth and so perceeded to hold you up."

"Yes, you scart Kit Bandy, you did! Thomas, some of these fine days you'll come up short o' wind, and then you'll quit your boyish pranks with me. But say, Thomas, what are you lurkin' round here for, anyhow?"

"I'm prospectin'," answered Tom; "and I don't s'pose you and Thunderbolt are here for yer health—snookin' round for nothin'."

"No, we wer'n't snookin' for you, Thomas," Kit replied, with a silent chuckle at his conceit; "but the fact is, we're here for a purpose, and that purpose is to rescue one Miss Mollie Adamson, that the Rustlers carried into the Basin a captive. A secondary object is to size up the Rustlers' strength, locate their headquarters, and make a kind o' a survey o' Jackson Basin, and all such information as will help toward finally roundin' up the Rustlers for a necktie matinee."

"It's a plaguey wonder you didn't git matineed to a limb gittin' into the Basin," declared Old Rattler. "Several days ago a party o' tourists, includin' an English duke, war doin' the Yallerstun Park. For their guide they had a gal, Miss Hazel Bell, the darter o' the old guide, Nick Bell, who was too rumatic to go out, so he sent his gal, who knows every wonder and every rod o' the Park."

"It seems a gang o' Captain Lurid's cut-throats run across the party and carried the duke and Miss Hazel off captives—probably for ransom."

"Word war sent to the sheriff at Cinnabar and he put out Deputy Sheriff Crigger and three men in pursuit o' the robbers. Then I came along and they sent me to look for Crigger and his party and help 'em trail the outlaws to their den. In the pass leadin' over from the Park I come onto the deputy sheriff and one of his men, swayin' in the breeze from the limb of tree! They'd been dead two or three days."

"I thought the matter over and concluded to invade the Basin alone and see what I could see. I trailed around till I struck this cabin, and here I find the gal guide, Miss Hazel."

"Indeed! Was that her with that woman the man called Lucille?" asked Old Kit.

"That war her, Kitsie."

Kit and Jove exchanged glances as a look of disappointment swept over their faces.

"We'd felt sure the gal was Miss Mollie," said Bandy.

"Don't you know the gal?" asked Tom.

"Neither of us ever saw her, Tom."

"She may be in the house," Rattler hinted; "I wouldn't give up till I knowed sure."

"No, by the horn o' Joshua! I'll stay here till snow flies but I'll know whether the gal's there or not. If I war sure there war no others about but those we've seen, I'd boldly walk forth and invade that fortress like a Trojan army. But say, Thomas; look there! Feast yer old eyes on that superb beauty!"

It was the queenly form of Lucille he referred to. She came in sight, and, standing in the doorway, raised a field-glass to her eyes and looked long and steadily eastward across the silent Basin lying far below.

"She's expectin' some one from that way, sure," Bandy decided, "for every time she shows up she looks off that way kind o' anxious-like."

For several minutes the woman continued her looking through the glass, then suddenly turning she called out, in a clearly audible tone:

"Tobe, bring out the machine—quick!"

"Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Old Tom, "I wonder what the machine is! Can't be an infernal machine, I hope."

Tobe—the water-carrier—soon appeared from the cabin with something in his arms that caused Kit to utter an exclamation of surprise.

"By the great jingrickies!" ejaculated Jove, "it's a surveyor's compass and tripod!"

"No, no, Jove," protested Old Kit; "that's no compass, lad; it's a heliograph—an instrument for telegraphing—signaling by means of the sun's rays. Surveyors I've seen use 'em, and talk from mountain to mountain more'n fifty miles apart. That woman's the operator. Now watch her; she is goin' to shoot."

The man, Tobe, placed the tripod a few rods in front of the cabin. On the top of the tripod was something covered with a black cloth which the girl at once removed, revealing a good sized mirror mounted with ball and socket on the tripod.

The woman now glanced at the sun. It was almost in the zenith. She adjusted the glass accordingly.

"I'd give the earth, with Kit Bandy to boot, if I could read her signals," averred Old Tom Rattler.

"People sometimes learn by keepin' their mouth buttoned, and eyes and ears open," whispered Old Kit. "Unless these folks have a code of signals o' their own, they'll use the Morse telegraphing Alphabet. All ever I seen did. They'll turn the glass that's an a pivot so's it will catch and reflect a vivid ray of light into the air that'd fairly knock a man down if it'd him in the eye. A quick flash, or two quick flashes, or three, stand for one, two or three dots in the Morse system. They represent certain letters. Then come quick flash and a long flash, and a long flash and a quick one, and so on somehow that way all through from A to Izzard. There she goes!"

The woman adjusted the glass on its pivot so that the rays of sunlight were caught and reflected back into the heavens like a vivid flash of lightning in the darkness. For fully two minutes she continued to manipulate the glass in this manner; then she covered it with the cloth, turned her eyeseastward and with a notebook and pencil began making a record.

"She's now takin' notes," said Kit; "she telegraphed to some one over east and's now takin' the reply. I'm going to git into a better position, and mebbly I can see where the heliographer is located, anyhow."

The three changed their position to higher ground, back toward the bluff, from whence they could command a view eastward, and they had no sooner done so than they caught the flash of a light far away over on the range—more than twenty-five miles distant. They knew by the continued flashes, that they were the reflected rays of the sun—the work of a heliographer.

"By the great Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Old Rattler, "if we'd only the gumption to read that silent talk we might git on to a big scheme."

"The woman's taking it all down," said Lurid Jove; "and mebbly we can prevail on her to give us a translation of the message."

"I'd like to see you prevail on a panther to give up one of her cubs," replied Old Kit. "The fact is, boys, this is one of the signal stations o' the Jackson Basin outlaws, and you can see they have another over yonder almost in the very midst of the homestead ranchers. And there's no tellin' how many other telegraph stations

they have; nor is there any wonder they work so promptly and work their cussedness so. They're organized, they are! That telegraph means somethin', but what?"

"Maybe they've got wind of our invasion and they're telegraphin' for troops," opined the Thunderbolt.

"They may git some solid lead instead o' wind before they git through with Bandy's Big Six," added Old Kit. "One Black Bill Bates o' Jackson Basin undertook to tamper with us folks, and got terribly mussed up. But, see the lightnin' flashes way over you. That feller must have hadogins o' news to tell our Lucille."

For fully twenty minutes the signaling between the two points was kept up, the girl noting every flash on the distant range in her book. When their work was finally completed, Lucille hastened into the cabin and was followed by the faithful servant, Tobe, with the heliograph.

Immediately Jove came out again and walked away and disappeared on the opposite side of the plaza. In a few minutes he came back mounted upon his horse. He rode up to the door of the cabin, when Lucille emerged therefrom and handed him a note, saying:

"Deliver that to Captain Lurid, quick as you can!"

The scouts heard the order, and Old Kit remarked:

"Boys, this is a robber's signal station! That message goes to the boss robber, Captain Lurid, himself. We must secure it and know what it means, if we have to destroy the faithful Tobe. If we don't find out by the message where Mollie Adamson is, we'll soak in information o' some kind that'll help us out, maybe. Boys, the message must be secured."

"Leave it to me," whispered Jove, "and I'll bring that message back with me. I see he's going the way he came up with the water."

"Go, lad!" commanded the Mountain Detective, "and let the Thunderbolt bolt."

The young mountaineer glided noiselessly away through the shrubbery.

CHAPTER VIII.

A SHAFT FROM CUPID'S BOW.

WHEN little Jove had disappeared the two mountaineer detectives settled down to await his return and meanwhile, to watch the movements about the cabin.

In a little while Lucille came from the house, a jaunty sailor hat on her head, and a light staff in her gloved hand. She was followed to the door by the fat woman, heretofore mentioned, who waved her hand to Lucille, shouting:

"A pleasint walk to yees, Lucille dear, and may the saints preserve yees precious self and bring yees back in safety to yees friends."

"Thank you, Bunty!" responded Lucille, with a toss of her head, as she walked away.

"Bunty is her name," declared Old Kit, "and a daughter of the land of the Shamrock is—'Bunty.' Tom, she's just the woman for you, and I believe I could convince her that you are the mate for her, providin', of course, she is single and free-hearted like you."

A grim smile passed over Old Tom's face. He made no reply to Kit's badinage.

Lucille crossed the plaza and disappeared in the woods beyond, and Old Bunty went back into the house.

Ten minutes perhaps had passed when the scouts were startled by a scream issuing from the cabin. It was a woman's scream, and it sent the hot blood leaping through the veins of the scouts, and brought Bandy to his feet with the exclamation:

"By the horn o' Joshua! Tom, somethin' devilish is goin' on in that cabin, and I mean to know what it is if I die in the attempt!"

"I'm with you, Kitsie!" rejoined Tom, springing to his feet, and taking up his big Winchester.

Out from the bushes they stepped and strode rapidly up to the cabin. The door was open and without ceremony Bandy, followed by Tom, entered the building.

No one was then in the room, but in an adjoining apartment they heard the angry voice of a woman using some threatening language.

Bandy and Rattler took in the situation at a glance. The cabin had but a single outer door. It was divided into two rooms, and had evidently been built for defense as well as a residence. It was a wooden fort. The door was of double thickness hung on four massive iron hinges. It was provided with a loop-hole, and heavy bars for fastenings. There were two windows in the room—one on the east side and one on the west. They were not over twelve inches square and were without glass. Under each window was a

thick on hinges. This shelf was so as cover and bar the window. The cooking utensils, a table, chairs and household furniture were neatly arranged about the room. The door leading into the adjoining room was partially closed. It was a heavy affair with a wicket in the center, and bar and staple for bolting. This latter discovery was somewhat puzzling from the fact of the door being in the partition; and it finally occurred to Kit's mind that the adjoining room was used as a prison.

All this the two old shadowers took in at a single glance, as it were, and they had no more than done so when Old Bunty appeared from the other room, her face flushed with anger.

She could not have been over forty years of age, nor could she have weighed less than two hundred pounds.

At sight of the intruders her looks of anger gave way to surprise, as she stopped short and with hands raised, exclaimed:

"Howly saints kape me! and where from did yees bloody owld spalpeens come from widout the manners of knockin' at the door?"

"Don't git skeered, my dear lady," answered Old Tom Rattler, doffing his cap, and bowing gracefully, "for we're only a pair o' harmless old hunters wanderin' about to kill time and see the sights. My name is Job Brown, and my pard's name is Jack Killgallon, a noble son of Irish descent. We saw you in the door as we war passin', and says Jack to me, says he, 'Job, look at that woman. I know she's a good soul with a kind heart and will give us a bite to eat and a cup of water.'"

At this bit of flattering falsehood the woman's face became overspread with smiles, and closing and barring the partition door behind her, she replied:

"And that I will, as shure as me name is Bunty McCorkle. Set yees down, Misther Killgullion, and Misthur Brown, and I'll give yees a good cold bite, for de little gintleman looks holier and hungry, and a sup of cold coffee will do him good."

With a smile at Old Tom's assurance, Kit sat down, but Rattler walked over near the partition door and took a standing position, leaning upon his rifle, his face toward the open door.

Bunty McCorkle soon placed some cold victuals on the table and invited the men to help themselves which they proceeded to do, Tom still maintaining his standing position with eye and ear on the alert.

Once the old hunter was sure he heard a low sob and the gentle murmur of voices in the adjoining room, and it was all he could do to keep his composure.

A conversation was kept up with Bunty McCorkle all the while, and finally old Tom asked: "Where's your husband, Mrs. McCorkle?"

"May the saints preserve his soul! the poor, dear man has been in his grave these five years, and it's a poor lone widdy I am, I am, Misthur Brown."

"How strange and sad things be in this world," Old Tom assumed, with a lugubrious look. "Here's my pard, Jack, who is a widder, too. He's often said the world wasn't to him like it was before he lost his pardner, and—"

"The poor, dear man!" broke in the fat widow, with a sympathizing look at Old Kit, who began to feel uneasy.

"Yes, yes, Mrs. McCorkle," Tom went on, to prevent Bandy from saying a word, "you're lonely and Jack's lonely, and there's no reason why you should be. Jack was a good, kind husband, and I know you war a good wife, and each o' you could fill the place o' the departed one and be happy. I know my pard, Killgallon, feels that way, for I am an old, old man, and have see'd lots o' heart affairs, and I know from the way Jack acted and talked when he caught a glimpse of you floatin' 'bout here it was a case o' love at first sight, Mrs. McCorkle."

"Job Brown, you ole foo—" began Kit, no longer able to keep quiet; but he was cut short by Bunty, who exclaimed:

"Och! ye naughty little spalpeen!"

"Wal, now, isn't it true, Mrs. McCorkle?" Rattler continued; "wouldn't you two make a splendid couple?"

"Oh, dear!" responded Bunty, with a sigh, and a melting glance at Old Kit; "yees set me head and me heart all aworry, yees do. It comes so suddint, Misthur Brown. Besides me nerves are all ashake, for Misther Barney McCorkle was a tall, illigant gintleman, and when I comes in here and sees Misther Killgorra, I sez to meself, sez I, 'It's Barney McCorkle riz from the grave and come back to

me bosom.' Then I see'd it wasn't dear Barney, but his very picture. Oh, wurra! wurra! Misther Killgolly, put plenty sweet sugar in yer coffee, and ate and dhrink hearty!"

"Thank you!" said Old Kit, evidently confused, while Old Tom was straining every nerve to keep a sedate face.

During the entire repast Rattler kept up match-making, and before Kit arose from the table he virtually had betrothed him to Bunty McCorkle.

As for the old detective, he was for once helpless—virtually at Old Tom's mercy, which was not at all sparing. He had been unable to get a word in edgewise, and so Bunty accepted his silence as an acquiescence in all that Old Tom arranged.

There was only one thing Kit had to be thankful for, just then—which was that no priest was at hand, for there was no telling how far his friend would have carried the joke in such a case, or, at least, have made the endeavor.

Kit of course was desirous of keeping in the good graces of Bunty McCorkle, in hopes of gaining all the information possible regarding the place and its inmates, but Old Tom, while enjoying the joke on Kit, was less politic, and as soon as Bandy arose from the table, he turned, unbarred and opened the partition door and boldly entered the adjoining room, where a sight met his gaze that filled his heart with mingled surprise and sadness.

CHAPTER IX.

THEY TARRY TOO LONG.

THE room into which Tom Rattler had bolted so unceremoniously was, indeed, a prison, as well as a bedroom.

It was somewhat larger than the other apartment. There was no way of entering it except by the inner door. There were two windows, or rather, holes in the walls, where light and air were admitted. There was a small one on the west side not over eight inches square, but the one on the east side was double that size. Under each was a hinged shelf that could be raised and the window covered.

In one corner a little room was curtained off, the curtains hanging from ceiling to ground floor, and behind this was a bed. Along the opposite wall were half a dozen bunks.

Near the largest of the windows sat the young girl the scouts had seen on the Plaza with Lucille. Kneeling before her was a second girl, with her head buried in the lap of the first, sobbing bitterly.

At sight of Old Tom the girl in the chair uttered a little cry of surprise, not unmingled with joy. The other girl raised her head and with streaming eyes gazed up into her friend's face, and then at the intruder.

"Oh, Mollie!" burst from the lips of the girl in the chair, "it is a friend!—Uncle Tom Rattler!"

Both girls arose to their feet. Tom recognized the speaker as the girl-guide, Hazel Bell. The other was a stranger. He was about to speak when Bunty McCorkle came bounding into the room like a tigress and, seizing Old Rattler by the collar of his coat, whirled him out of the room like an autumn leaf in the wind.

"Yees dhirty little bla'guard!" the irate woman exclaimed, "I'll tach yees how to poke yeo-self into the little ladies' private room!" and as she spoke she drew back and landed her fat fist on Tom's jaw with the deftness and force of a pugilist, the blow sending him reeling across the room. And she would have followed up the attack had Kit Bandy not stepped between them. Laying his hand upon her shoulder, he said in an approving tone:

"Peace to you, my brave little woman! You have taught the meddlesome ole Mattie a good lesson."

"Oh, saints hilp me!" Bunty exclaimed, staggering forward as if about overcome with nervous exhaustion, and dropping her head on Kit's heaving breast; "it overtakes me dilicate strength, Misther Killgolly! Oh, dear! dear!"

She was, to all appearances, about to wilt down in Kit's arms, and to avert such a disaster he wisely settled her two hundred avoirdupois down upon a chair, where she went through a little hysterical performance which Old Kit witnessed with some alarm.

In the mean time, Old Rattler had got back into the room with the two weeping maidens, and approaching the strange girl, he said:

"You're Miss Mollie Adamson, o' Rosebud Ranch, be ye not?"

"I am," the girl answered, hope kindling in her breast.

"And you and Miss Hazel are both prisoners here?"

"Yes, sir."

"That's what we thought."

"Oh, I hope you will save us!" Mollie exclaimed, wringing her hands in the distress of fear.

"That's what we're here for, gals," avowed the old mountaineer, in a low tone; "that old feller in there is the great mountain detective, Kit Bandy! That Irish wildcat has fallen in love with him, but she don't seem to fancy my style."

"She's a demoness, Uncle Tom!" declared Miss Bell; "only a few minutes ago she slapped and choked Mollie most cruelly because she declined to sit in this prison."

"The wench!" hissed Tom; "she deserves a good poundin'; but say, Hazel, what become of that English duke that was captured when you were?"

"I do not know. He was taken somewhere else."

"Have there been many men here since you gals were brought here?"

"No; but one has staid here. The two that brought me went away at once, and so did those that brought Miss Adamson. Miss Lucille Lake, an outlaw's daughter, who has a cold, cruel heart, is mistress of this place; and that Old Bunty McCorkle has been our guard, and a cruel wretch she is! She has the strength of an elephant, and I believe she would take delight in strangling us."

"Have you gals overheard any—" Old Tom began, but was cut short by an imperious female voice in the main room, demanding:

"What does all this mean, Bunty McCorkle?"

It was the voice of Lucille, who had returned from her walk, ignorant of the presence of strangers in the cabin until she confronted Old Kit.

"Please, Missus Lucille," explained Bunty, "and it's two hunters that shopped for a bite to ate, and this is Misther Jack Killgolly, so like me dear, blessed husband, rest his soul in peace, that I thought it was Barney come back from the grave, so I did, so I did."

Kit saw that Lucille was an older person than first appearance indicated, and that she was a woman of will and courage was evident in the expression of her handsome yet colorless face.

That she was also of quick intelligence was manifested in the look of incredulity she gave the old detective and the McCorkle woman.

"By what route did you enter Jackson Basin?" she asked of Kit, in an imperative tone.

"We drifted in from the west, madam," Bandy responded, considering that the situation would justify any prevarication.

"And what is your object in coming here?"

Kit Bandy, now understanding that they had no ordinary woman to deal with now, and that nothing was to be gained by dallying further, resolved to bring things to a climax, and thus answered her question:

"We're here to escort them runaway girls back home!"

"Then, sir, you are Old Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective!" declared the woman, turning ashy pale, her eyes flashing fire.

"Now take it quiet, madam," Old Kit calmly urged, "we've no quarrel with you. We hold you in no ways responsible for the sins of others, but we've a duty to perform. Thomas, bring out those girls and let us depart."

Old Bunty had listened to the conversation between her mistress and Old Kit like one in a trance; but when Bandy called to Rattler, she started up with a cry like a wounded tigress, and darted into the prison room, where she began to belabor both Tom and the girls with direful threats and anathema.

But, already the girls had donned their hats and wraps for departure. Discovering this the woman seemed all the more inflamed with rage, for she flew at Mollie and attempted to tear the shawl from her shoulders. Old Tom interfered and pushed her aside. This added fuel to the flame and turning, to make a rush upon him, she aimed a blow at the old mountaineer to crush him down.

But, Tom sprung aside, eluding her charge, and the momentum of her rush threw her flat upon the floor, fairly stunning her. Lucille, wild with excitement, ran to Bunty's help. Tom pushed her aside and hurried Mollie and Hazel into the main room, closed and barred the door on the mistress of the cabin and her tigress.

"This, gals," said Old Tom, "is my pard, Kit Bandy."

"I've heard my father speak of you," said

Mollie Adamson, looking up into the face of the old detective; "he has often wished that he might meet you, Mr. Bandy."

"God willing, he shall, my child," replied Kit; "I hope to have the pleasure of delivering his daughter safe into his arms."

While Kit was thus speaking Old Tom went to the door and looked out. As he did so he started back, a cry of alarm issuing from his lips, for, up toward the cabin from the lower end of the Plaza, he saw a dozen mounted white men and Indians, with Captain Lurid, the outlaw chieftain, at their head, riding at a sweeping gallop.

"Kitsie," the old hunter said, "we've tarried too long! The robbers are on us! We're caught in a death-trap!"

CHAPTER X.

LITTLE JOVE SECURES THE MESSAGE.

WHEN Thunderbolt left Kit and Tom he hastened away down the butte, following almost the very route by which he and Bandy had gone up. He saw that the dispatch-bearer, Tobe, was going by the same path he had brought the water, and down in the valley was where he would intercept him.

When he reached the base of the butte Jove armed himself with three or four rocks half the size of his fist. Then he selected a position from which he could operate when the messenger should come within range.

To shoot down the Rustler would have been an easy matter, but Jove Runkells never took human life unless in self-defense. Moreover, he had such confidence in his trained arm that he never wasted powder when a well directed stone would better answer the purpose.

Soon the dispatch-bearer approached, and, as he drew near, Jove let fly one of the stones in his hand. The Thunderbolt's arm had not lost its cunning, for the man tumbled from the saddle, stricken as if by a real thunderbolt.

Hastening to the prostrate messenger, Jove found him senseless, and bleeding profusely from a cut on the side of the head.

At once he searched for the paper Lucille had given into the fellow's care. He had no difficulty in finding it, and, as he drew it from the man's pocket, a thought struck him: he would read the paper, then replace it in Tobe's pocket, so that when he recovered his senses and found the paper in his pocket, he might not mistrust the purpose for which he had been stricken down, nor by whom.

So opening the paper, he read as follows—neatly written in a feminine hand:

TERRACE NOOK, Sept. 15th.

"CAPTAIN LURID:—

"I conversed with 'Tip-Top' this noon. He says the homesteaders are in a fever of excitement over the abduction of Mollie Adamson, and thinks her imprisonment will do more harm than good. He says a rescuing party, led by Old Kit Bandy, the Mountain Man-Hunter, is now in the Basin, and that every effort and speedy should be made to see that they stay here. Do not delay, captain, in throwing out scouts, and perhaps it would be well to send a guard to Terrace Nook for a few days.

"All's well here.

"LUCILLE."

"That settles it!" mused the young mountaineer. "The Rustlers are onto our invasion of this valley, and when the news gets to headquarters, there'll be music in the air. Bandy's Big Six'll have something else to do but rustle for rustlers and tell stories, and perform gymnastics for exercise. But, if I'd destroy this message, and kill the messenger, it might be days and days before the news of our presence would be known at headquarters, which might be miles from here. If I destroy the paper it will be evidence to this fellow when he comes around, that it was the work of Bandy's crowd, and would know that we were right here. The man no doubt knows all 'bout what's in the message, and so Cap Lurid'd git the news anyhow. To kill Tobe and hide his body is the only safe plan, but that would be murder, pure and simple. I might be justified by men in doin' the deed, but not by God. No, I will not kill him—I will not commit deliberate murder. This fellow has done me no harm, no difference what it would do. I'll replace the message in his pocket. I'll do more; I'll bind up his wound, and when he recovers and finds his paper safe, and his head bandaged, he'll think, perhaps, a friend did it all in an attempt to play a joke on him—but a rough joke, by jingrickys!"

With the Rustler's own handkerchief, the big

boy bound up the man's head, and staunched the flow of blood. He caught his horse and hitched it near him, then he hurried away and secreted himself where he could watch proceedings.

In the course of fifteen minutes he saw the man throw up his hand and pass it over his head. Then he rose to a sitting posture and gazed around him in utter bewilderment, still fumbling about his head.

At length he rose to his feet, staggered to his horse, looked at the animal, the hitch-rein, and then around him again. He was in dire confusion. He acted like a drunken person.

Suddenly a thought seemed to strike him, and he thrust his hand into his pocket and drew out a paper—the message. He opened it and read it. Again he looked around.

Finally he untied his horse and climbed into the saddle. He turned the horse's head toward the butte and glanced up the heights. Then he headed the animal south and sat quiet in the saddle. He was undecided as to whether to go, or return to Terrace Nook. But he finally got the matter settled. He rode on.

With a smile the Boy Thunderbolt began retracing his steps up the wooded butte, and within two hours and a half from the time he had departed on his mission he was back where he had left Kit and Tom.

But the old men were gone, at which Jove was somewhat surprised. He sat down to await their return, for return they surely would to keep their appointment with him. He concluded they must have gone to reconnoiter the opposite side of the clearing. He kept his eyes upon the cabin.

Half an hour had passed when the young mountaineer saw the woman Lucille come from the woods on the further side of the Plaza and go into the cabin. And, still a few minutes later, he heard within the house the sound of excited voices and what must have been the violent slamming shut of a door.

"By jingrickys!" mused Jove, "the folks o' Terrace Nook must be havin' an old family jar—a reg'lar old Kit-Sabina-Bandy round-up, and if—"

His musings were interrupted by the sound of hoofs. Horsemen were coming toward the cabin from the lower end of the clearing!

He glanced toward the cabin and beheld Tom Rattler standing in the door! But only for an instant was the hunter in sight; he stepped back into the cabin, and the heavy door was banged shut. At the same moment a dozen ruffianly-looking horsemen, among whom Jove saw the bandaged head of Tobe, galloped up to the cabin, dismounted, and, with furious demonstration, demanded that the door be opened immediately.

But their demands or commands were not heeded. The door remained closed, and, after a moment's hesitation, one of the men brought an ax and attacked with violent fury the strong oaken boards of the door.

A deep, pent-up roar now came to the ears of the boy mountaineer, from the cabin. He knew what it meant, when he saw the ax-man stagger back and fall to the earth. And, so did the band of desperadoes, for, half-carrying, half-dragging their groaning, cursing comrade they withdrew from the immediate vicinity of the cabin door.

CHAPTER XI.

LIVELY TIME AT TERRACE NOOK.

THE hope kindled in the breasts of Hazel Bell and Mollie Adamson of rescue from Lucille and the vicious Bunt by Old Tom and Kit, was crushed in an instant by the startling words of Old Rattler—that they were "caught in a death-trap."

"Close the door, Tom, and we'll fight 'em till our veins run dry!" decided Kit Bandy, now a war-horse on his mettle.

Tom closed the ponderous portal and shot its double bolts, while Bandy, by raising the hinged shelf under each window, closed the openings.

The Rustlers, dashing up to the cabin, dismounted and demanded, with oaths and dire threats, that the door be opened.

The defenders made no response.

Then the door was attacked with an ax, the building trembling under each blow.

Old Tom threw a cartridge into his Winchester and sent an ounce-and-half ball straight through the heavy panel. A groaning burst of execrations, and retreating footsteps told that the shot had passed through the plank and severely wounded the ax-man.

At this juncture a fierce, ear-splitting shriek of mingled delight and rage pierced the very

heavens. It came from the lips of Mrs. McCorkle. She and Lucille having discovered the arrival of Captain Lurid and a number of his friends, thrust her frowzy head out at the window of the prison-room and gave expression to her pent-up fury with all the power of her lungs.

"Rosycrusians!" exclaimed Old Rattler; "Kitsie, that was the screech o' your sweetheart, Bunt! There's no pulmonary trouble with her lungs!"

The outlaws retired and consulted. They did not attempt to renew the assault. The cabin had been designed for defense and as they were not the defenders, they stood at bay.

The cry of Old Bunt brought Captain Lurid around to the window where, crouching under the opening, he entered into conversation with the women. As that one window was large enough for a slender person, at least, to crawl through, Bandy kept a watch on the women through the wicket in the door for fear Lucille might attempt to escape. There was no danger of Bunt getting her robust form through the opening, although they would have been glad to be well rid of her.

As for Lucille, it was all important that she be kept with the besieged, for, as long as she was there, the outlaws would hardly venture to shoot into the cabin, nor would they dare resort to fire to dislodge them.

For several minutes Lucille conversed with the man under the window. The old detective could not hear much that was said, but enough to satisfy him that the women were giving a full account of the situation inside, and the character of the invaders, for he heard his own name mentioned.

When the conversation finally ended, Bandy saw the women making such preparations as indicated an attempt to escape. As this could be only through the window he awaited results, whispering to Tom:

"They're goin' to attempt to crawl out at that window and git away. The hole's bigger'n it looks if Bunt can squeeze her sylphish form through it. I only hope she can. I'd rather be shut up in here with a she-grizzly, for she's strong as a hell hag and as furious. The vision o' Barney McCorkle has vanished. Lucille has dispelled the visions o' happiness that you, you ole pirate, inspired in her susceptible heart. But if she attempts to peel herself out o' this cabin fu't, why, let her peel; but Lucille must keep with us for protection 'g'inst Rustler bullets and fire. Ah! Bunt's goin' to crawl out fu't!"

Kit could only see with one eye, for the wicket was open but half an inch. He did not want the women to know they were being watched.

A smile mounted his face as he saw Bunt step onto a chair and thrust her head and shoulder into the opening, completely filling the space and excluding all light.

Then followed a scrambling, scratching sound, mingled with labored breathing, murmurs and imprecations.

"Press through, Bunt! press through!" Lucille was heard to say to her companion. "Don't get excited now, and get yourself into trouble, but work your body through."

But, Bunt had either underestimated her size, or overestimated the dimension of the window for, after getting her head and shoulders out, she found it impossible to get any further. She wriggled and squirmed and pulled with her hands, and pushed and kicked her feet, but her broad hips would not pass through, and with a cry of disappointment she endeavored to back out into the room again.

But, she could not get back. She was as fast in the window as a cork pressed in a champagne bottle.

"I'm fast! I'm sthuck!" she yelled, and ended off with a scream that would have shamed a locomotive whistle.

After getting her breath and ceasing her struggles, she called upon her friends and all the saints in the calendar to "hilt" her.

Old Kit and Tom, now broadly grinning at the woman's ridiculous situation, decided to relieve her of the pinch she was in, so they opened the door and hastened to her assistance.

"What's wrong here?" asked Bandy as they entered the room which was now lighted by only the little six-by-six air hole on the west side of the room.

"Mrs. McCorkle is fast in the window," Lucille explained. "Do help her back into the room, if you can."

Old Kit endeavored to do so. He sought to pull her back, and he tried to push her through. She would move to and fro from hips to armpits, but no further.

The two Rustlers were on the outside when they could to release the unfortunate man, but the united efforts of friends and foes were unavailing: Bunty was fast, and under the circumstances there was no prospect of immediate relief.

Lucille seemed cast down and despondent over the mishap. It prevented her own escape. She walked out into the room where Hazel and Mollie stood. Old Tom followed, to see that she did not attempt to unbolt the outer door; but, discovering that she was closely watched, she threw herself into a chair, with an air of grim resignation, and said:

"I can bide my time. It's only a question of a few hours with you two old scoundrels. A fire on the peak will, in three hours, bring fifty white men and Indians to this spot!"

"That may all be, miss," replied Tom placidly, "but there'll not be fifty of them by the time they git hold o' us. I hate all this, but our cause is just. We don't war 'ginst weemen, but for them, and this fact enables us to throw a powerful sight o' clear conscience, death and destruction into a fight with the minions o' Satan."

Lucille made no response, but with pale face, compressed lips, and knitted brows she turned her face away, nervously tapping the floor with her heel.

Meanwhile, Old Kit on the inside, and two Rustlers on the outside, had renewed their efforts to release Bunty, and not until the unfortunate woman was so exhausted as to be unable to help herself in the least, did they give up their efforts for her release.

And thus matters stood at Terrace Nook when the shadows of night settled over Jackson Basin.

CHAPTER XII.

A STORY ON OLD KIT.

OVER in a densely-wooded ravine under the shelter of a rocky but vine-clad bluff, Bandy's Big Six lay in concealment awaiting the return of Old Kit and Little Jove from their reconnaissance of Castle Butte.

Time would have hung heavy on their hands had it not been for the stories with which they were entertained by the oddest of mortals—little Ichabod Flea.

Noon came and the sun swung over the line toward the west. Several fine deer passed within sight of them during the day, but Ichabod forbade a gun being fired despite their desire for a roast of fresh venison.

Finally, Buzzy, the young colored Patrol, arose to his feet, saying:

"Boys, dis child's got to take a little promise-made or die wif de stiff."

"Then leave that gun and them revolvers," ordered Ichabod, "or you can't go. There's to be no shootin' in this Basin till we have to shoot. Then, I opine, it'll be shoot to kill."

Buzzy stripped off his belt and threw it down by his rifle and departed.

"That nigger can't be quiet to save his soul," declared Ralph Kirkman. "He'll get himself into trouble yet."

"I hope when he's had a stroll he'll be easier," remarked Joe Randolph.

"He may meet with some of the same trouble that perhaps is keeping Old Kit and Thunderbolt away," added Morgan.

"Give Old Bandy time, boys," urged Ichabod; "he's prodigal of the hours. If he'd take a notion to, he'd stop on the way and use up half a day to tell Little Jove some all-fired story. You can't count on Kit till you see him, for he never makes a promise to do something within a given time, since the day, some years ago, he failed to keep a promise as to the hour he'd be back to camp. Of course, it wasn't his fault, for he met with one o' the most ludicrous adventures that ever befell any man."

"Let's have it! Tell it!" exclaimed the boys.

"Well," began the little detective, leaning back against a rock, "I'll tell it while Kit's absent for he won't low me to mention it when he's around. It occurred years ago down in the Sioux country when the Ingins were in a great hair-lifting mood. Kit and I were doin' scoutin' for the military. We were out on a trip one day with a company of cavalry under Major Doyle. We stopped for dinner on Red Willow Creek. While there we heard, off up the creek, the report of rifles. The sound came from the worst wooded hills in the West.

"Old Kit was sent to reconnoiter. He pushed northwards 'bout two miles, and was feeling his way towards a point from whence came the sound of Ingins voices, when he was suddenly set upon by half a dozen ambushed red imps.

Kitsie downed two o' the varlets and then dashed away, the yelling braves after him.

"Right down through a little glade, in which half a dozen Ingins squaws were busy skinnin' and cuttin' up three or four deer their lords had slain, the old fugitive charged. He saw the squaws, it's true, but what was an Ingins squaw, or half a dozen, to the great Mountain Detective? On he charged, never swerving an inch for the smoke-skin shemales.

"Now, among the squaws war a lulu, called Tall Sunflower. She was a six-footer, and large and powerful in proportion, and for savage cussedness she hadn't an equal in all pantherdom.

"You see, the Sioux were out on a hunt, and upon these occasions they always took their squaws with them to do the drudgery—that is, skin and cut up and pack in the game to camp, which may be miles away. When it comes to carryin' a load on the back, them squaws can discount a buck, and make a Mexican burro look small. I've see'd a squaw tote a quarter o' buffalo four miles.

"Well, boys: this Tall Sunflower saw Kitsie spring into the glade and come toward them, and stooping, she picked up a club of good size, and as Bandy came up she whacked him one on the head that knocked him galley-westward.

"Kitsie didn't git up, either, for the blow had rendered him senseless as a basswood log. Sunflower gave him a rap after he was down, and the bucks comin' up was goin' to finish the she-giant's work, when she brushed them all back with her club, givin' them to understand that Kit was her captive, and that if there was any scalpin' to be done, she meant to do it.

"And there the great, horrid wench stood gloatin', and frothin' and hiss'n like a crazy hell-hag over the motionless form of her victim—her eyes glarin', her tongue lickin' out as if in imagination she was lappin' blood like a wolf.

"It war a good thing Kit didn't see it or he'd 'a' died with fright at the frenzied performance of the unnatural wench. But he wasn't to die there. Tall Sunflower was goin' to take him to camp that all might see the victim of her prowess, and show the camp how a squaw could torture a victim.

"The deer bein' all dressed were loaded onto the backs of the squaws for removal to camp, and as Kit hadn't come to yet, he'd have to be toted, also. Sunflower was his self-elected beast of burden. He was lifted and placed, back to back, upon her shoulders, and was tied there by thongs cut from a green deerskin.

"Over and around her breast and waist, and the form of Kitsie, the thongs were passed, securely lashing the great detective to her back, and then the procession started. Bandy's long legs dangling behind and his heels, almost dragging on the ground, striking those of the squaw. His bleeding head rolled helpless about the neck of the giantess, the blood from his wound trickling down over her bosom.

"Sunflower led the procession; the squaws with the venison came next; the braves bringing up the rear—all moving, Ingins fashion, in single file.

"As Sunflower bent forward under her load Kitsie's lithe form was considerably warped, but the easy, awayin' motion of his nag, and the balsamic odor of the pines, finally revived him; but it was a long time before he could get through his achin' noggin the situation he was in—that he was lashed back to back upon a she savage, his hands tied together in front of him.

"He could not see forward or back, for, Sunflower bendin' forward, threw his face upward, and tree-tops and batches of sky was all he could see. But, he never let on that he had recovered his senses and was able to walk. He'd better opportunities for reflection ridin'. He figured out correctly that he was bein' toted to the Sioux camp and rememberin' that he'd killed two of the bucks when they pounced upon him, he knew a special entertainment would be gotten up for his sole benefit.

"The next thing to be considered was as to how he could escape. His hands were securely tied, but his feet and legs hung dangling free. Now Kit Bandy's got a quick, fertile brain; so he put the machine to work and soon had a plan of action mapped out, though he was still ignorant of the fact that Lady Sunflower was his jingrickasha.

"But, all this time I wasn't idle, by any means. We heard Kit's racket with the red wolves, and with a dozen troopers on foot hastened to inquire into the matter. We came to where he'd downed the redskins. We seen that

some one had been killed or badly wounded, for there was blood in plenty on the ground. You see the Ingins carried their dead warriors with them.

"Their trail was plenty plain, and we hurried along after the varmints, eager to know the fate of our friend. We came in sight of the rear guard. We saw they were lugging two lifeless forms, but we knew neither of them was Bandy's. We also got a glimpse of one or two squaws on ahead, bending under a load of fresh meat, but not a thing could we see of the great scout. Still we followed up.

"The head of the moccasin procession had descended into a very dark, deeply-wooded valley when we suddenly heard, quite a ways ahead, an unearthly screamin' and screechin' that the echoes took up, and repeated, until it seemed that all the witches and warlocks in purgatory had broken from their retreat and were holdin' high carnival in that darksome valley.

"Of course, we thought Bandy might be in the racket, and we charged upon the Ingins at double quick. The noble bucks dropped their dead and fled like deer. The squaws threw down their meat and deliberately sat down by it, but as we wasn't warrin' against women, we didn't disturb them. We ran on but found no Bandy.

"The noise that caused us to charge on the foe had entirely subsided. We were disappointed, surprised, baffled. We went back to the squaws and tried to question them about Bandy, but they were dumb as oysters. If they understood a word we said they played ignorance in great shape. A grunt, or a frown, or a shake of the head was all we got out of them, and in disgust we left the stolid wenches and started back.

"We reached the glade where Kit was captured and began a more careful search for some trace of the missing man. While thus engaged the blamest lookin' thing I ever saw came from the woods into the glade!

"Boys, we had to look the second time before we could make out just what it was. Then we saw it was the bent form of a man with somethin' on his back. We looked again and saw it was Old Kit Bandy with the limp, exhausted form of that lilly of the valley, Tall Sunflower, lashed upon his back!

"Here, men!" he exclaimed as his blood-shot eyes fell upon us, "cut these thongs—quick! I want to murder this blankety-blanked Ingins—destroy him!"

"I cut the thongs that bound the two together and those that fettered Kit's hands. Tall Sunflower dropped to the ground apparently helpless, but she was not so. She quickly sprung to her feet and glared around her like a bewildered tigress.

"Old Bandy turned and their eyes met. The awfulest look of surprise I ever saw on any one's mug then mounted to the face of the great Mountain Detective. I saw him swallow as if somethin' was chokin' him. He drew his sleeve across his bloody, perspiring brow sort of confused. Then he turned to me, the personification of disgust, and asked:

"Ichabod, was that catamount on my back?"

"I answered in the affirmative. Kit fingered his belt as if feeling for a revolver. I actually believe he contemplated suicide. But the Ingins had taken all his weapons.

"The soldiers burst into a peal of laughter. Bandy frowned. Old Sunflower showed her teeth and snarled like a wolf. Her long, bloody fingers closed, and opened, and closed again nervously. She'd been baffled—cheated of her prey, had the old human terror. Finally she turned and slouched away into the bushes. The gorgeous flower faded from our view.

"It was a long time before Kit told me all the particulars, so far as he knew, of that adventure. He said that, after he'd recovered his senses, and found himself being carried along on a savage's back, he planned escape. In going down the hill into that dark, wooded valley, his feet dragged on the ground. This was his opportunity.

"He made a lurch forward, with all his strength. This landed him on his feet and jerked his captor off of hers. The situation was exactly reversed. Sunflower was on his back, and he lit out down into the dark valley, the giantess screechin', and kickin', and clawin', and clutchin' like a litter of hyenas. Her voice was so masculine that he never dreamed of his burden bein' a squaw until their bonds of union had been severed in the glade."

"By Yove, that bane a good yolk on Kit Bandy!" said Pete Anderson, and the young Swede laughed uproariously.

"Yes," Ichabod went on, "and after we returned to camp and Kit's wounded head had been— Ah, hist!—not a word, boys!"

This sudden admonition from the little detective was occasioned by something moving among the bushes on the opposite side of the ravine.

Instantly every eye turned in the direction Ichabod was gazing, when, to the surprise and fear of all, they saw a big, burly, black-faced Indian half-breed, who resembled a Patagonian giant, emerge from the bushes, holding in leash a gaunt, ferocious-looking bloodhound!

They were upon the trail of Bandy's Big Six!

CHAPTER XIII.

BUTTED TO DEATH.

A DEAD silence reigned in the ravine.

Ichabod Flea's hand dropped to his revolver, and keeping his eyes fixed on the burly half-breed, and his dog, he whispered:

"Look sharp, boys! They're trailin' us! They mustn't escape alive if we're discovered!"

At the edge of the thicket the Rustler-scout stopped. His dog glared fiercely and uneasily around, sniffed the air and tugged impatiently at the leash.

While the brigade was thus waiting further developments something whizzed through the air and crashed into the bushes behind the scout. Both man and dog gave a quick start, raised their heads and listened.

Again there was a whirr in the air and a dull crack in the vicinity of the half-breed's head. With a groan the giant reeled and fell to the earth as though a bullet had pierced his brain.

The dog uttered a deep bay and leaped forward, jerking the leash from his master's hand. Straight across the ravine he came, lunged into the bushes and flew at the throat of Pete Anderson!

Instinctively the Swede threw up his arm and the jaws of the ferocious brute closed upon it like a vise.

Ichabod Flea whipped a knife from Pete's belt, reached around and drew its keen edge across the dog's throat, half severing the head from the body. The strong jaws relaxed their hold; the fierce brute staggered back with a gurgling growl, reeled away and fell in his death throes.

Then the hurried tramp of feet came to the hearing of the Patrol, a lithe figure glided into the thicket and stood before them.

"Little Jove, by the Jumpin' Jalaps!" exclaimed Ralph Kirkman.

"Bless you, my boy!" added Ichabod, grasping Jove's hand; "it's all clear now; it was your thunderbolt that smote that bushranger over there!"

"I hit him a crack, I guess," responded Jove, "and I see you have swiped the dog all right. They were a precious hard-lookin' pair, I can tell you, but I know I didn't kill that fellow, and before he comes 'round and gits his top cleared up, we want to be on our way to Castle Butte."

"Anything up? Make any diskivery? Old Kit Bandy in trouble?" asked Ichabod, in the one breath.

"We made a diskivery? Old Kit's in hot-water, and—"

"Then he's happy!" broke in Ichabod; "but go on, Thunderbolt."

"We struck a Rustler at the foot of the butte and followed him to a log cabin on a terrace of the butte, away up in the atmosphere. There we diskivered two very pretty young women, and one very fat and ugly old woman, and we thought one of them might be Miss Mollie, and—"

"Good! good!" exclaimed Ralph Kirkman.

"Maybe not as good as you think, Ralph," Jove continued; "but, while we were watchin' the cabin, who should we run ag'inst in the brush—on the same mission as we were—but Old Tom Rattler, the Red River Epidemic, as he styles himself."

"Glorious tidings!" exclaimed Ichabod.

"Tom was on the hunt for an abducted girl, too," Jove went on, "and one of the two we saw he said was his gal, he thought."

"We discovered that the cabin was a signal station, and, even while there, a message was received from away over East by the woman that seems boss of the ranch. They telegraph back and forth with sun-glasses that Kit called a hellograph or somethin'. But, I got the message, finally, and read it, and it was word to Captain Lurid that Kit Bandy, with a party, was in Jackson Basin, and advised prompt measures to round us up."

"But, boys, they've already got Kit and Old Rattler rounded up in that cabin, and, if they ever see to-morrow's sun rise, we've got to get over there and lick 'bout four outlaws apiece, and raise the siege if the old mountaineers ar'n't done for before we can get there."

"Then let us be off," urged Ichabod.

"But that confounded nigger's not got back!" Ralph Kirkman reminded.

"The darky's all right," assured Little Jove, smiling; "I run onto him up the creek just as he finished the last of thirteen raw grouse-eggs that he'd found in the sage-brush. He will wait there for us."

"Tha dem soag-egg!" exclaimed Pete, "Aa get even with him for not bring ma some eggs."

In a few minutes the party under Jove's guidance was on its way to Castle Butte.

It was about a mile to where Joe had run across the Buzzy.

They soon reached the place where he was to await their coming, but he was not there. A pile of egg-shells told Jove he was not mistaken in the place.

"Well, now that's provoking!" declared young Kirkman.

"Let tha fool nager go," urged the Swede; "he not got plenty sense 'nough to pound sand. He snoop 'round lake hound and soag eggs. I bet yug alcohol."

"We can't go on without the darky," declared Kirkman; "he's a brave fellow and we'll need him, no doubt. But he is provoking, and we'll have to tie him up if we keep him in sight."

"Say, look yonder! What's that creepin' along that ledge?"

Little Jove thus spoke, at the same time pointing across the creek to an object he saw crawling along the side of the opposite bluff.

The brigade stood under cover of the low bushy pines on the bank of the stream. Opposite, a steep bluff rose to the height of about thirty feet. From the bottom to the top of the bluff there was a space, rough and rocky, of about two rods in width, entirely devoid of vegetation, but upon either side of it was a dense growth of pine scrub.

From this cover, Little Jove had seen a figure emerge and start stealthily across the opening near the summit.

"By snakes! it's an Ingin!" declared Ichabod.

And so it was—a supple-looking savage with bare shoulders and head, and a tomahawk half raised. His body was half bent forward, and his eyes were fixed ahead of him as if riveted upon something in the bushes.

As a cat steals upon a bird in the grass, softly raising his feet, step by step, the savage moved across the barren—the personification of murderous stealth.

In almost breathless suspense the brigade watched for the climax. It soon came. The savage was about ten feet from the bushes when, with the swiftness of lightning, a dark, half-doubled form rushed from the bushes and collided with the Indian's head with a shock that was plainly heard across the creek, and with such violence that the Indian was sent whirling down the bluff, while the other was thrown backward full length upon the ground.

"By heavens! it is Buzzy!" burst from Ralph Kirkman's lips, "and he's butted the Ingin into Kingdom Come!"

"And his own brains out as well!" added Joe Randolph.

"Bah! dim soag-egg nigger got no brain!" declared the Swede.

Slowly the prostrate form on the bluff rose to a sitting posture and gazed around him. It was Buzzy, true enough!

The situation explained itself. Having no weapons with him, Buzzy had called his "but-ting" power into play, and rushed with lowered head upon the redskin. The collision of their bare heads had been terrific, and it was evident to the amused brigade that their comrade was somewhat confused by it, yet. He rubbed his head and gazed around him, the white of his eyes showing clear across the creek.

Finally he rose to his feet, turned around a time or two, evidently looking for the redskin. At length he caught sight of a prostrate form at the foot of the bluff, and with his hands on his knees he peered down at it, for several moments. Then his teeth began to show across his face, and a smile overspread his countenance and broke into a chuckling laugh.

"Say, Ingin!" he finally called down, to the motionless savage, "did I butt youah brains out? Nigger's head harder'n Ingin head, hey?"

The brigade could hold in no longer, and burst

into a peal of laughter that caused them to start up, and open his eyes with surprise. A confused smile again displayed his ivory

"Golly! you see me ram dat Ingin?" he called to his friends, as they stepped into sight.

"We did, George Washington," answered Kirkman, "and it was a successful job, for I guess the redskin's deader'n a smelt—never knew what hurt him. But, come on; we mustn't tarry here longer."

Buzzy descended the bluff, crossed the creek and received the congratulations of his friends on his success as a "butter;" then the brigade resumed its journey toward Castle Butte.

CHAPTER XIV.

SABINA BANDY ON DECK.

CLOSE at the heels of the tireless young mountaineer followed the Big Six and the wary Ichabod.

With little deflection from a straight course Jove led the way toward Castle Butte; but, long before it was reached night settled around them, and the darkness, while it covered their movements, revealed, paradoxical as it may seem, a sight that filled their minds with the gravest fear. It was a red light up on the mountain-side, immediately in the vicinity of Terrace Nook.

"I am afraid," observed Little Jove, "the Rustlers have fired the cabin and burnt Kit and Tom out."

No one could offer anything to the contrary and so the little band pressed on under the gravest apprehensions.

They finally reached the butte and began toiling up its heights, and when Jove at length landed upon the third terrace, he almost dreaded to approach the edge of the Plaza.

As he did so, however, his heart gave a bound of joy, for the cabin was standing, and the light which had given him so much uneasiness was from a big bonfire which the outlaws had lighted in the Plaza about eight rods from the strong house.

A survey of the situation was hastily made. The siege was still on. Of this there was no doubt. There were a score of outlaws in sight, one-third of them being Indians.

Buntly McCorkle was still fast in the window and an outlaw stood on the outside holding her head while a second one was endeavoring to chop her out; but it was some time before the brigade could understand just exactly what the trouble at the window meant.

Little Jove left his friends to do a little scouting. He made a detour of the cabin and gained the opposite side of the Plaza. He crawled as close as he dare, but within earshot, of a group of Rustlers who were occupying various positions of inactivity, in the opening.

Among these he saw Captain Lurid, the outlaw leader of Jackson Basin. He had never seen him before, but recognized the red-bearded villain from the description he had had of him. After listening awhile Jove heard one of the group say:

"Cuss the luck that stuck that woman fast in that window! She must think she's a sunbeam and can crawl through a knot-hole."

"It's a mistake," Captain Lurid responded, "that Lucille did not come out first, for if Old Buntys should peg out before we get her chopped out, the way for Lucille's escape will be blockaded."

"It doesn't seem they'll ever git her out, captain," a Rustler observed, with evident impatience.

"Don't get in a sweat, Luke," admonished the chief; "we don't want that chopping to cease until that other work's completed or those old scoundrels in there might get on to the racket. Much of the success of the other work depends upon the blows of that ax and the noise Buntys makes."

This remark set Little Jove to thinking. Their future actions, he saw, depended upon the release of the woman fast in the window, and, also, some other work that was in progress. But, what was that work? It must be something near the cabin, or why should its success depend upon the blows of the ax and the noise the woman made?

The Thunderbolt resolved to make further investigations before he returned to his friends. So, creeping along to the bluff, he passed around and approached the cabin from the rear. He got within twenty or thirty feet of the building, and, lying flat upon the ground, listened.

In a moment he started. He heard very distinctly the click of something near the north-

of the building. It sounded like a thing in contact with gravel, and after shifting his position slightly, he caught the outlines of men against the light beyond, working near the base of the building.

It required no second thought to convince him of what the villains were doing—that they were digging a passage into the building under the foundation!

"Just so, my worthies!" the young mountaineer said to himself; "I'll see what can be done for you."

Without delay he retreated to the bluff and made his way back to the Big Six and Ichabod and made known his discovery.

The situation was earnestly discussed, but no plan of action that promised success, in face of the superior force of the enemy, could be settled upon.

"Boys, something must be speedily done," Ichabod Flea finally said, "and I'm going to do it. Here, take care of my weapons until I get back. Buzzy, give me my bundle—my blanket. Now, you fellows hold firm here until I show up again."

With these words of precaution he departed.

"What's he up to?" questioned Ralph Kirkman; "he might have told us what he meant to do so that, if he needed help, we could have acted intelligently."

A thought flashed through Little Jove's mind as he recalled an incident of his sojourn with Ichabod, in the mountains of Colorado, a year or so previous.

"Did that bundle he called for consist of a blanket only?" he asked of his companions.

"I suppose that was all," answered Kirkman, "though I never saw the bundle unrolled. I've thought, however, that it was rather large for a single blanket, and he may have an infernal machine rolled in it."

Twenty minutes passed, and the Big Six were still discussing Flea's conduct, when they suddenly saw a strange figure emerge from the shadows upon the opposite side of the Plaza and move toward the group of outlaws.

It was the form of a woman clad in a slimsy, ill-fitting dress, a sun-bonnet, and a thin, well-worn shawl. On her arm she carried a little gaunt bag.

"By the great Jingrickys!" exclaimed Jove Runkells; "it's Old Sabina, the wife of Kit Bandy!"

"In other words," suggested the quick-witted Kirkman, "Ichabod Flea, Old Kit's detective pard!"

"That's him! the champion fraud of the whole Northwest!" asseverated the Young Thunderbolt.

CHAPTER XV.

SABINA INTERVIEWS HER HUSBAND.

THE outlaws were astounded by the appearance of the strange old woman in their midst, at that place, and at that unseasonable hour.

Captain Lurid was the first to collect his senses, and advancing toward her, asked:

"In the name of all creation, woman, who are you that comes here at this hour?"

The woman stopped, pushed back her bonnet, revealing a haggard, careworn face, and drawing a long breath, she answered, in an earnest but excited tone:

"I am Sabina Bandy, the legally wedded and wrongfully deserted wife of Old Kit Bandy! That's who I be, please the Merciful, Master!"

The outlaw stared at her a moment as if dumfounded.

"What?" he exclaimed; "you the wife of Kit Bandy, the old Mountain Detective?"

"That's what I said," she retorted; "I'm the wife of Kit Bandy, Mountain Detective and lie-promulgator, and heartless ruinor of female happiness!"

"What on earth brings you here, Mrs. Bandy?" Captain Lurid demanded.

"Vengeance!" she answered, fiercely. "Vengeance!"

"On whom?"

"On Kit Bandy!" emphasizing with uplifted arm.

"What makes you think he is about here?" Lurid asked, a little suspicious that something was wrong.

"I don't know that he is here," Sabina responded, "but I do know that he is in Jackson Basin somewhere, and if there's another woman in the place besides his wronged wife, he's flirtn' with her, the poor, silly fool!"

"But I don't understand how you found out he was in this Basin, Mrs. Bandy?"

"I only heard he was, and come to see," she

answered. "I was told at Rosebud Ranch, by a boy that was wounded in a fight with the Rustlers, that Kit and a party of men had come into this Basin to rescue some girl that'd been carried off here. I follered on horseback. I saw the light of this fire from the valley, and I left my horse and climbed up here, hopin' to find rest for the night, even if it wasn't the camp-fire of my heartless husband and his gang. I have follered him from Fargo almost day and night, and I mean to trapse this Basin over but what I find him if he is here, dead or alive, I don't care which!"

The woman looked as though she was capable of doing all she claimed, and her answers were all so frank, and without the least evasion or hesitation, that Captain Lurid was disposed to accept her story.

The Rustlers all became interested in her—not through any feeling of sympathy, but for the amusement her manner of speech, as well as the vinegar-and-salt-expression of her face, afforded them.

"Well, madam," the outlaw chief said, after some reflection, "I have to inform you that your husband is in yonder cabin with no less than three handsome girls—"

"Oh, merciful heavens!" cried the woman. "Oh, good Lordy! Three gals! On, the old villain!"

"But I am sorry to inform you," Lurid went on, "that, in all probability, you'll be a widow before morning."

A wild, hysterical shriek burst from the woman's lips, and she staggered and almost fell under the blow.

"Put it mild, captain, put it mild!" whispered a well-dressed Rustler, with blond, nut-ton-chop whiskers; "by Jove! you'll kill her. Don't you know we may be able to use her to our advantage if we handle her carefully?"

The captain admitted, with a nod of the head, his friend's politic suggestion, and acting upon it, he addressed Sabina in a more considerate tone.

"There might be some mitigating circumstances that would let your husband off with his life, but I'll not make a positive promise to that effect, now," Lurid observed to her.

"What has he done to you, that you want to kill him?" Sabina questioned. "He's an old villain, I'll admit, but all the same he is very dear to me!"

"Well, he's treading and trespassing on forbidden ground," the Rustler chief answered.

"He has taken possession of my cabin there, locked himself and my family in, killed one of my men, and doubtless means to kill all of us if he can, and will probably be the death of that woman stuck in the window there."

"Did he stuff that woman in that window?" exclaimed Sabina with a tragic air; "why didn't the old fool stuff a pillow in? That's the way he used to do, the wretch!"

This was too much for the listening outlaws, and, despite the gravity of the situation, and the efforts of Lurid to look serious, they burst into laughter.

This threw Old Sabina into a passion of rage, and for a minute or two no stage queen could have thrown more spirit into an effort than Mrs. Bandy did into the vituperative lecture she gave these outlaws.

Captain Lurid appeared to indorse every word she uttered by an approving smile, and, after she had run out of breath, and was forced to stop, he said:

"You know how to take care of yourself, I see, Mrs. Bandy, and I wish you'd been able to take care of your husband. If that woman should die, and any more of my men are shot, I shall certainly have to hold him responsible. That woman has been stuck there over three hours, and she is so near gone that she cannot scream any more, and that means she is pretty near death's door."

"The poor thing!" sighed Sabina glancing toward the cabin. "Oh! won't I give Kit Bandy a taste of torment for that mean, cowardly piece of work—stuffin' the winder with a poor old woman to protect himself! I'm going into that cabin or I'll know the reason why; and I'm goin' right now! Oh, I'll make it hot for him!"

"If they'll let you in, go ahead," assented Captain Lurid, "but they'll probably let us in as quick as they will you."

Old Sabina failed to detect the irony of his words, and turning, she started toward the cabin, saying:

"I'll show him, the old villain!"

Captain Lurid was a quick-witted villain when the situation called for prompt action, but evidently he lacked a detective's penetrat-

ing mind else he might have suspected some ruse or scheme on the part of Sabina Bandy, notwithstanding the perfectly natural manner in which she played the part of the wronged and heart-broken wife. But, the outlaw's anxiety to dislodge and capture Bandy and his companion, apparently quieted all suspicion, and as the woman started toward the cabin, he said:

"Boys, move up toward the house, and if they do open the door to admit her, make a rush and hurl yourselves against it before it can be closed and barred; that is our chance."

The idea seemed to strike all favorably—the opportunity a good one, and they began moving up.

Sabina reached the door and gave it a blow with foot and fist, at the same time shrieking out:

"Christopher C. Bandy! Are you in this house?"

There was silence—no response, and the question was repeated with renewed emphasis.

"Yes, madam, I am!" was the answer elicited through the port-hole in the door, "and I mean to stay here for a while, at least, the Lord willin'."

"Open this door instanter, you heartless heathen!" Sabina commanded, "or I will call the judgment of high Heaven down upon you!—I will set fire to the house and burn you all to death!"

To this the outlaws heard Kit demurring in a low, conciliatory tone; then his voice sunk lower and they were unable to hear what he said.

Finally Sabina turned to the waiting outlaws and said:

"You men must go back to where you were. He refuses to admit me while you are around the cabin."

The captain's scheme had failed. Kit Bandy was too shrewd for them, and, with a look of disappointment, the gang walked back to their former position.

Then the door was opened half-way and Sabina glided within.

CHAPTER XVI.

SABINA WARNS KIT AND TOM OF DANGER.

THE only light in the cabin was the feeble rays that shone through the port-holes of the door and east window, and when Sabina whisked into the room it was like going from daylight into darkness. It was several moments before she could be accustomed to her surroundings, and discern the outlines of the others' forms in the dim twilight, though her hand was seized in a friendly grasp the moment she entered, and a voice said:

"Good for you, my little pard!"

"Is it safe to speak out, Kitsie?" was Sabina's first words.

"Perfectly," was the answer; "we had to gag our hostess, and tie her down in a chair, much as I hated to do se-h a thing with a pretty woman. But, what is it? Speak out?"

"They tell me Old Tom Rattler is in here," said Sabina.

"Right here, Icha—I mean, Sabina!" Tom answered for himself, grasping her hand.

"That's that same musical old voice, and that same clasp of the hand!" Sabina welcomed.

"Where's the boys, pard?" Old Kit asked.

"Within hailing distance of here—ready to strike whenever the iron's hot."

"Good! I told Tom Little Jove would not remain idle if he met with no trouble."

"No, the young Thunderbolt has been hard at work ever since he left you fellows," Sabina assured. "He got that heliograph message and read it. It was to Captain Lurid informing him that Bandy and a gang were in Jackson Basin. But, what I came here to tell you in particular is that the Rustlers are digging into the cabin under the foundation at the northwest corner of the building."

"Horn o' Joshua! is that a fact?" exclaimed Kit.

"Yes, Little Jove saw them at work."

"The lurid-livered varlets!" Old Tom growled; "you see, there's no board floor in that room, and the nor'-west corner is contained off into a bedroom. So, they mean to come up under that bed, the cunnin' cusses! We'd never mistrusted sich a move, and we've got to look sharp. That room may even now be full o' the sneak-in' jackals."

"That's what they're waiting on," decided Kit; "we thought it might be Ole Bunty's release they were holdin' back for, but their scheme unfolds beautifullly to my mind: they meant to fill that curtained bedroom full o' men,

make a feint on the outside door with another party to draw us there, while the bedchamber assassins got in their work. But now, Tom, we'll fool 'em, and turn their own plans so's they'll work to our advantage or Kit Bandy's cunning can be voted a lurid fraud."

"I knew if you understood the situation you'd be able to plan escape with the girls, and that's what brought me here," averred Sabina.

"It's well you come, pard," responded Kit, "but it'll be necessary for you to get back to the boys and hold them in readiness to strike, and strike hard and wicked, when we fire a signal shot from that window. We'll bar that middle door so that them as enter that room'll not get it open in a moment. When they do make the attack, I'll give the signal and you lead the brigade against the outlaws that remain on the outside. Then we'll open the outside door and skip. That's the plan o' campaign!"

Having thus decided upon their course of action, Sabina remarked promptly:

"Now open the door and let me out, and I'll fret myself away to the brigade as quick as I can, consistent with safety, do so. If the outlaws detain me then we'll have to trust that your Big Six will do their duty, anyhow."

Having made sure no Rustler was lurking near, Kit opened the door and Sabina walked out, and straight toward the Rustlers, in apparent dejection of spirit.

Captain Lurid advanced to meet her.

"Well, how did you find your husband?" he questioned.

"I found the old fool as I expected—happy as a lord!" she answered, showing some signs of anger.

"Then Kit Bandy really is in the cabin?"

"Yes, with them doll-faced girls clingin' to him like twinnits to a hair. Oh! I could have strangled the hussies!"

"Mrs. Bandy, you are insanely jealous," Lurid said, a smile upon his bearded face; "but don't let that trouble you. Those girls will not have the pleasure of clinging to him long."

"Then you will allow my husband to depart with me?" and Sabina's face brightened up.

"I cannot promise that," answered the outlaw; "all will depend upon how matters terminate here. I can give you no hope, whatever."

"Oh, deary me!" burst in grievous accents from Sabina's lips, and she began pacing to and fro wringing her hands and weeping.

At every turn she lengthened her beat and, finally, when furthest from the outlaw, she made a bee-line for the brush weeping bitterly.

Captain Lurid called to her to stop, but she heeded him not. She kept on into the woods.

An Indian was sent to bring her back. Near where both Sabina and he disappeared in the woods, the sound of a silent struggle might have been heard, while yet Captain Lurid stood watching for their re-appearance.

But, ten minutes passed and they came not into sight.

A faint suspicion entered Lurid's mind, and an anathema escaped his lips.

The well-dressed outlaw with the mutton-chops came up, and, laying his hand on the chief's shoulder, said:

"By Jove! captain, that woman has played us for a shoal of suckers!"

Before Lurid could reply, their ears were greeted by a cry from the direction of the cabin, and in the momentary excitement it occasioned Sabina Bandy was quite forgotten.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BLOW IS STRUCK.

THE cry that had attracted Captain Lurid came from the lips of Buntly McCorkle. It was a hysterical exclamation of joy. She had at last been released from her imprisonment in the window, and was assisted to a seat near the bonfire, out in the Plaza.

In the cabin all was very quiet, though Kit and Tom had not of course been idle since Sabina's departure. They moved the stove and placed it against the partition door. Every thing loose was used as a barricade. Even the tripod of the heliograph was converted into a brace which, of itself, would have held the door until it had been battered off its hinges.

Every minute or two Old Rattler applied his ear to the wicket in the door and listened. But all he could hear was the ax-blows of the man trying to release Buntly, and the responsive groans and cries of the suffering woman.

It was a decided relief to all parties when she was finally cut loose and taken away.

And now that all was still elsewhere, the out-

laws digging at the corner of the house could be distinctly heard, and it was evident they had made an opening into the room.

The window vacated by Buntly now admitted a stream of light from the bonfire, and Tom presently saw the curtain around the corner move. The outlaws were entering the room!

Just how many of them were to enter the room Bandy had a curiosity to know. He had counted all he could see in the Plaza after Sabina left, making allowance for at least half a dozen not within sight, and when Tom announced that they were gathering in the adjoining room, he noticed that the crowd outside had diminished about one half.

By the movements of those remaining outside Bandy was enabled to tell when the crisis was close at hand, and he and Tom stood at their posts, ready for the worst.

It soon came. A deafening yell from half a score of throats in the adjoining room fairly shook the building, and would have been appalling to the old scouts had it not been expected.

This appraisal was answered by a yell outside, mingled with a discharge of firearms. Then came a crash outside the middle door that fairly made the hinges and bolts creak and groan, and dislodged a shower of dust and chinking from the walls.

Kit Bandy discharged Old Tom Rattler's rifle through the port-hole in the window barricade.

By this time the Rustlers outside were thundering against the outer door, in combined attack, and the din it created was deafening, horrible. It seemed that the house must come down whether the door yielded or not.

But, suddenly as it had begun, the attack on the outer door ceased, and the crash and crack of rifles became a new element in the infernal din, to which were soon added shrieks and groans of agony!

Kit glanced out through the port-hole in the door. His Big Six had come to the rescue! Their deadly rifles were playing into the ranks of the Rustlers!

"Bring on the gals, Tom! Our time has come!" cried Old Kit, unbarring and throwing wide the door.

With a yell he dashed out into the plaza, to take a hand with his boys, in the 'fun,' but, already the conflict was virtually at an end. Surprised by the sudden appearance of Bandy's Big Six, half their numbers shot down by the first discharge of the Patrol brigade's rifles, the dismayed outlaws broke and ran for cover, Captain Lurid taking the lead.

Leading Mollie and Hazel, Tom Rattler dashed from the cabin and started for the woods.

"Fall back, boys! fall back to the woods!" shouted Old Kit when he saw Tom and the girls skurrying away.

The brigade fell back to cover of the pines and there made a stand; but the demoralized Rustlers did not attempt to follow.

A minute or two later a dozen frantic redskins and outlaws came pouring from the door of the cabin into the light of the bonfire. They had broken open the middle door, but had found the old mountaineers and maidens gone, and, ignorant of the defeat of their friends outside they had rushed out into the deserted Plaza where another surprise greeted them.

A broadside from the guns of Bandy's Big Six sent the astounded ruffian crew back into the cabin.

"Now, boys, is our time to be goin'!" exclaimed Kit, "but, I'll first call the roll to see that all are here."

He called the name of each of the Patrol. Every man answered to his name.

"Anybody hurt in the fight?"

No one answered.

"Tom Rattler, where are you and the gals?"

"Here, Kitsie!" was answered.

"Then, lead the way, Thunderbolt, for the valley! Mornin' must find us miles from here."

Ralph Kirkman escorted Mollie Adamson, and Old Tom piloted Hazel Bell. Little Jove piloted and Old Kit and Ichabod brought up the rear.

It was pitchy dark and everybody virtually had to feel the way down the butte, though all trusted to Jove Runkell's guidance to keep them from tumbling over a ledge or falling into a washout. And well did the young mountaineer perform his task through an instinct born of a life of experience in the mountains. After two hours of exhausting toil they reached the base of the butte.

There they called a halt for a few minutes rest and consultation.

"We, of course, will be followed in the mornin'," Bandy remarked; "our destination is Rosebud Ranch. The foe will naturally expect

us to go in that direction and will follow that way."

"Then, Kitsie, we should fool 'em; go in the opposite course, and find our way out by some unfrequented pass if we can strike one," suggested Old Tom. "But, if we can't git out any other way we must fight our way out. As long as we've two gals to defend it will give us eight boys the fightin' inspiration o' a jungle full o' tigers, unless Kit Bandy, who's such a tormented old fool 'bout a pretty woman, gits—"

"Button, Thomas, button that mouth!" interrupted Old Kit; "and if you know the way that you've suggested, lead on, for you can beat any man in these hoary ole mountains blunderin' into safety."

Little Jove now became Hazel's escort and Tom Rattler took the lead as guide. He headed westward, at once.

They were still compelled to pick their way slowly through the darkness, though with far less difficulty than when descending the steep butte.

They had not proceeded far when Joe Randolph touched Kit Bandy on the arm saying, in an undertone:

"Here, Kit, is a bit of paper; I wish you would take care of it for me."

Bandy thought the request a very strange one, but, as there was no time then for questioning, he took the paper, put it in his pocket and went on, soon forgetting the matter.

Owing to the fact that the party was now traversing unknown territory, and the darkness being extreme, their progress was necessarily slow; but with untiring energies they kept on, and, even before they had hoped for morning, it began to grow red in the eastern sky.

With the dawn of day it was discovered that one member of the party was missing. It was young Joe Randolph!

A halt was made until he should come up for no one thought he could be far behind.

The sun came up and flooded Jackson Basin with the light and warmth of day. But, Randolph came not!

What did it mean? The party began to grow uneasy.

Suddenly Old Kit happened to think about the paper Joe had given him. In the darkness no one had missed him, and at the time he gave Bandy the paper was the last time he was heard to speak. Taking the paper from his pocket, the old detective started at sight of it, for there were blood stains upon it. He unfolded it. It was a leaf torn from a diary. Long-ways of the sheet was scrawled these words:

"I am wounded—was shot in the fight. I can go no further. I do not wish to detain you. May God deliver you all from danger."

"JOE RANDOLPH."

The little party was fairly shocked by this startling disclosure. Sadness was upon every face.

"Boys," said Old Kit Bandy seriously, "that is a heroic example of the unselfishness of a brave boy! Rather than detain us and endanger our situation, he has quietly laid down by the wayside wounded and bleeding—perhaps to die! But, boys, Kit Bandy never yet deserted a helpless friend, and never will! Joe Randolph must be looked after, even though I go alone to his assistance!"

"Not alone, Kit! Count me in! We'll find Joe Randolph if we have to die for it!"

It was Ichabod who spoke—true-heart Ichabod.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A NEW PERIL.

KIT BANDY and Ichabod started to retrace their steps in search for Joe Randolph while Tom Rattler and the balance of the brigade, with the girls, continued on, due westward. At the base of a certain butte or "bald knob," as Kit designated it, they were to await the coming of the veterans.

It was nearly noon when the point in question was reached. The distance was much greater than it had at first seemed, and all were ready for a rest, and a quaff of the cool, sparkling water that flowed in a little stream hard by.

But, a new difficulty was then made particularly apparent; it was the hunger-signal; they had not a morsel of food for breakfast!

There were deer in plenty in the Basin, and they could have killed one or two on their way to the "knob," after Kit and Ichabod had left them, but fear of a report bringing a band of Rustlers down upon them kept their guns silent.

er, after all had been seated awhile under the over of the woods at the base of "Bald Knob," Little Jove, restless as a panther, rose to his feet, saying:

"Folks, we've got to have somethin' to eat. I'd rather be killed by a Rustler and done with it, than die for want of grub. I'll run back in the hills and try my hand with a dornick, and if I can't down somethin' that way, I'll try lead. You see it's a ground-bog case. Does anybody want to go with me?"

"Aa go long with you," volunteered the big Swede.

"All right," assented Jove, and the two departed.

Rattler now had the first opportunity since the rescue at Terrace Nook, to converse freely with Miss Hazel, and turning the subject of conversation upon her capture, he inquired:

"Were you brought, Miss Hazel, directly to Castle Butte from the Park whar you war captured?"

"Yes, sir; we stopped nowhere on the way, but I could not tell you from what direction we approached Castle Butte," the little girl-guide answered.

"And I believe you told me that that Englisher, the Duke of Oregon, or somethin' like that, who was captured when you were, was hustled off somewhere else, did you not?"

"Yes, sir; I did not see the Duke after our capture. He was taken away—I did not see, nor do I know, where."

"Did it ever enter your mind, Miss Hazel, that the Duke was a lilly-lipped hummer o' a fraud?—an Englishman all right enough, the Lord knows, but no duke?"

"I had only one opinion of him," the little, brown-eyed maiden answered, "and that was that he was no gentleman."

"Wasn't he kind o' sweet on you?"

"I don't exactly know what you mean by that, Uncle Tom," Hazel replied, blushing slightly; "I know he was always endeavoring to force his attentions upon me, and I grew heartily sick of his coarse, silly vaporings. He was like most Englishmen, though, that ever came to tour the Park."

"But, what I want to ask you, Miss Hazel, is this," Old Tom went on; "did it ever occur to your mind that the Duke o' Oregon war himself an outlaw?"

"Oh, dear! no, Uncle Tom!" Hazel protested.

"Wal, it's a rocky fact, Hazel!" Tom averred; "that pretended, mutton-chopped, English Duke is nothin' more than a lurid-faced, Jackson Basin outlaw!"

"Dear me! Can it be possible?" cried the maiden.

"It's so, Hazel Bell, and if the truth was known he'd be found at the bottom o' your capture. I met the feller—the Duke o' Oregon—at Cinnabar, a month ago. Last night I saw him in the Plaza in front of that cabin—always at the right hand of Captain Lurid, the outlaw chief. What do you think o' that?"

"Oh, it's dreadful awful, Uncle Tom!" Hazel responded.

"The brazen-faced Briton failin' to win your hand by fair means, or what he'd call fair, concluded to try foul means. But I'm thinkin' the hull scheme's busted, and the Duke's been cut out by Kit Bandy and Tom Rattler and these gallant boys."

"Thank God!" cried Hazel, "for the brave friends that came to our rescue! Mollie and I prayed almost constantly for friends to come to our deliverance and He answered us."

"Then you believe in prayer, Miss Hazel?"

"Yes, indeed. Do you, Uncle Tom?"

"My dear girl," the old man said, a smile of happiness passing over his wrinkled face, "I've lived on the peraroes, and in the woods and hills these forty long years. Death and danger and crime and wickedness has been 'round and about me, yet I have lived through all. The unseen hand o' God has protected me. Faith in Him has been my shield. I may seem—I am rough—and do things men would call wicked, but, God is my judge, and some day—before long—I expect to be called to the Judgment Bar. I'm not afraid to go, gals, I'm not afraid to go."

As he thus spoke the old man lifted his eyes toward the blue skies, his face aglow with the radiance of a Christian soul.

Moments of deep, thoughtful silence followed; then Tom rose to his feet, saying:

"Girls, don't you want to take a little walk?"

"I should like to, very much," replied Mollie.

"And I," echoed Hazel; "I'm getting tired sitting here."

"Don't go far," warned Tom; "not beyond halting distance."

Hand in hand the girls strolled away along

the base of "Bald Knob," chatting as girls will.

About two hundred yards from camp they sat down upon a fallen pine.

Back of them the undergrowth was thick and the shadows lay deep.

They had sat there but a few minutes when they heard a low, purring sound in the bushes behind them.

In an instant they were upon their feet gazing into the thicket with searching eyes.

"My God!" gasped Mollie, but she could say no more.

Crouching within ten feet of them, its eyes glaring like balls of fire, its gaunt, tawny body and neck stretched at full length, its long tail quivering, was a huge mountain lion in the very act of springing upon them!

Mollie Adamson staggered back, uttered a terrified scream, and turning, fled.

As she did so she heard a rush of the big beast and a stifled cry.

She stopped and glanced back over her shoulder. She saw neither Hazel nor panther, but, to her ears came a wailing, despairing cry of anguish trailing off among the shadows along the base of Bald Knob.

CHAPTER XIX.

JOVE AND PETE'S HUNT FOR "GRUB."

WHEN they left camp in search of game, Little Jove and the big Swede passed westward around Bald Knob, crossed some low, wooded hills, and finally entered a narrow valley trending away toward the north. This they followed for fully two miles, and seeing no signs of game, they turned west again, ascended a long wooded hill from the summit of which they made a very interesting as well as surprising discovery.

At the foot of the hill before them lay an open valley or basin of hundreds of acres covered with bunch grass and threaded by a beautiful little stream. Upon all sides it was surrounded by wall-wooded hills that in places rose high and bluffly.

Upon the bosom of this little Park no less than a hundred head of cattle were grazing!

"By the great jingrickys!" exclaimed Little Jove, "there's a herd of the Rustlers' cattle!"

"And Aa bet avery head ban stole," added Pete.

"Very likely, Pete; but the presence of these cattle convinces me that a few Rustlers are not far away, if indeed, the headquarters of the gang itself is not near. We've got to go slow. Not a shot must we fire or our case will be investigated by a redskin scout. But, I'd like to take a fat steer to camp. I tell you a hunk of roast beef, broiled liver, and baked tongue wouldn't taste bad."

"By Yericho! you make ma mouth swaat!" declared the big Scandinavian, rubbing his ear vigorously; "say som'things what don't baan easy too hard for hongray feller to got holt on his hands."

Little Jove smiled, and after scanning the valley and surrounding bluffs, said:

"Let's go on down to the edge of the valley, Pete, and then we can get a better view of this side along next to the timber."

"Loogin' at tham cattle doan't fill ma stomaick one hal bit, boy. Aa laik to feed ma mouth with ma hands not with ma eyes; but Aa go long."

They started down the wooded hillside and carefully approached the edge of the Park. As they did so, Pete suddenly came to a stop, at the same time poking Jove in the ribs with his thumb, and whispering:

"Stap! Aa see a bear or something lay in weeds, right there over!"

Little Jove took a look at the object pointed out and replied:

"Pete, it's a calf lying down in the weeds. It has been concealed there by the cow, and she's gone off grazin'. That's the way cows do. It's about a two-months calf, and roasted veal, and broiled veal, and calf's liver, and sweet bread will make a banqueter's dinner."

"Oh, you make ma mouth come full hot swaat more! Aa eat the whole thang maself without cook!" averred Pete, his hunger aggravated by Jove's extravagancies.

"I'm going to try my hand on that calf, Peter," Jove declared, "and if I can swat it as nicely as I did that old Rustler yesterday, we'll take a carcass of veal back to camp with us."

So saying, the young mountaineer searched until he had found a stone to his liking; then, stealthily advancing to within ten feet of the hiding calf, he made a slight noise. The animal

quickly raised its head above the weeds and as quickly Jove let go his thunderbolt. Nor did his phenomenal skill fail him. There was a dull crack as the missile came in contact with the animal's skull, and, without a groan, the head dropped and the body lay as it had been, quivering in its death throbs.

Drawing his knife, Jove advanced, and entirely severed the head from the body, and while the blood was draining off, he made a gambrel with which he and Pete hung the carcass to the limb of a tree. All was ready now for the skinning, at which a life of experience had made the boy an expert, and the rapidity with which he flayed the little animal was astonishing to the Swede.

Just as the youth threw aside the hide he heard a low howling sound that caused him to start and glance through the trees across the valley.

"By jingrickys!" he exclaimed, "the cow's comin' to her calf! We've got to git out of here, Pete, or she'll have that drove down on us!"

The work of evisceration occupied but a few moments, and then stepping back and wiping his hands with some green leaves, Jove enjoined action:

"There, grab it, Pete, and line out!"

The big Swede threw the carcass across his shoulder and started off up the hill through the timber, on a run, Jove following at his heels.

By this time the cow was coming at a run, bawling in a frantic manner. She had scented the blood of her offspring and instinctively knew that something was wrong. Her bawls had reached to the remotest part of the valley and the whole herd was quickly coming down the plain like an avalanche, bellowing with affright.

By the time the hunters had reached the top of the hill the whole herd was gathered on the spot where the calf had been killed, crowding, trampling, snorting and bellowing—a seething, surging mass of struggling forms.

The hunters stopped and glanced back and not only saw the enraged beasts, but two horsemen, also, who dashed up to the struggling herd, and, with blows of their long whips, shouts and curses, endeavored to scatter the compact mass.

"Rustler cowboys, by jingrickys!" exclaimed Jove; "and now we have got to shin out over this hill! If them cattle don't trample every trace of that dead calf into the earth, they'll catch on to our scheme and look the matter up."

Without further delay the hunters pressed on and were soon over the hill out of sight of cowboys and herd.

Keeping under cover of the pines they made their way back toward Bald Knob, anticipations of a hearty meal of veal giving elasticity to their steps.

Finally they reached the base of the knob. It was still a mile to where they had left their friends. A deer-path ran up the side of the knob and wound around the south slope. It was a nearer way and the hunters took it.

Hurrying on they were nearing camp when they were startled by a piercing scream—a woman's scream!

With a cry of fear Little Jove bounded forward like a deer. He was satisfied there was something wrong at camp—that the cry had come from Hazel or Mollie's lips.

As he advanced he was suddenly brought to a halt by a sight that transfixed him with horror.

It was a huge mountain lion dragging a human form along the base of the knob below him! He saw it was one of the girls—Hazel Bell—in the jaws of the terrible beast!

He waited for nothing more. He drew his knife, and, like a panther himself, leaped down the side of the knob, his feet scarcely touching the earth, and hurled himself upon the beast, plunging his knife into its body as he did so.

With a terrible cry of pain and baffled rage commingled, the lion dropped its prey and whirling like a writhing serpent, it struck Jove a terrific blow in the face with its paw, sending the youth backward into the bushes, and then, with a short, convulsive cry, it reeled and fell dead at Hazel's side, Jove's well-aimed knife having pierced its heart.

Pete Anderson dropped his meat and ran to Jove's assistance. As he reached the side of the apparently lifeless Hazel, Old Tom Rattler came hurrying up from camp.

Just then Little Jove came staggering from the bushes, his hand to his face, his breast drenched with blood.

"My God!" burst from Tom's lips, "the boy's face is torn off!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE GLOOM HANGS HEAVY.

THE dying panther had indeed dealt Little Jove a terrible blow, disfiguring him for life, even if his life should be spared. His cheek was laid open to the bone. The skin on the right of the forehead had been torn down and hung over his eye like a curtain. The blood was pouring from the wounds.

The brave lad presented a horrible spectacle, and yet, as he glanced at his friends, the dead lion, and the girl's body saved from mutilation, a faint smile of satisfaction wreathed his blood-stained lips, and without a word he sat down, faint and weak from loss of blood.

For once Old Tom Rattler was confused—at his wits' end; but there was providential relief sent at the critical moment in the person of Kit Bandy and Ichabod Flea.

"Thank God, Kit, you've come!" the old man exclaimed.

A glance at the dead lion, the motionless body of Hazel, the ghastly wounds of Jove, told its own awful story.

"Oh, horn o' Joshua!" the old detective fairly groaned. "This is horrible! Pete, carry the girl to camp, and Tom and I'll help Jove!"

Pete took up the limp form of Hazel and started to camp, followed by the others with Jove.

Arrived at camp, Ichabod unrolled his blanket, revealing the garb of Sabina Bandy. He took up the little bag which the old woman always carried, and diving into it he drew therefrom a needle and thread, a little roll of adhesive plaster and a bottle of ointment labeled "cosmetic."

Ichabod's long experience had taught him just what few articles were most needed in case of accident to body or limb, and his knowledge of surgery enabled him to apply them with no little skill. He carefully stitched up Jove's gaping wounds, and then reinforced the stitches with strips of adhesive plaster. Then he had water brought and the blood washed from his face and neck, and with strips torn from Sabina's dress, the wounds were neatly bandaged.

In the mean time some of the gloom had lifted from over the party. It was discovered that Hazel Bell still retained a spark of vitality, and effort was now made to kindle that spark into a living flame.

It was found that her right shoulder had been terribly bruised and lacerated by the paws of the lion, and but for the heavy shawl she wore the bones would have been crushed. Ichabod, assisted by Mollie, dressed her wounds, and under their ceaseless ministrations, she began to revive, and at length Ichabod announced that she would soon be herself again.

This announcement acted like a stimulant upon Little Jove—not but what his splendid courage and will power had borne him well, but he was physically weak from loss of blood, and from the pain he endured, as well as by reason of anxiety over the supposed dangerous condition of Hazel.

It was several hours, however, before Hazel fully recovered entire consciousness and was made to understand that she was safe—that she had been rescued from the lion's jaws by the daring of Jove. The shock, however, had left her weak, and the pain of the lacerated shoulder caused her intense suffering.

While the situation now was not as bad as it might have been, it was not all encouraging. The camp had become a hospital. It would be impossible to resume their journey, perhaps for days, should fever and general prostration follow as the results of Jove and Hazel's weakness and suffering.

Up to this time Kit and Ichabod had remained silent as to the result of their search for Joe Randolph; but, when Mollie Adamson finally asked them plainly before all, if they had seen or heard anything of Joe, Kit saw that evasion would only make matters worse, and so he frankly said:

"I am sorry, Mollie, to have to tell you we found poor Joe's body. He had been dead for some time. He'd been shot through the right shoulder and virtually bled to death. In his hand, when we found him, was held this little book. It's a memoranda or diary with lots written in it. The last words written he'd scrawled in the dark and they read: 'Send to Mollie Adamson, Rosebud Ranch.'"

A little cry of anguish burst from Mollie's lips. Tears filled her eyes as she took from Kit's hand the little diary that she had given Joe less than three weeks before in her own home. She turned hurriedly through its pages and then as she placed it in her pocket, she said:

"Poor Joe! I shall treasure it as a precious remembrance of him and his self-sacrificing heroism."

CHAPTER XX.

KIT AND TOM SUP WITH ROYALTY.

ALL arrangements for spending the night at the foot of Bald Knob were made long before dark.

The carcass of the calf which Jove and Pete had secured was brought in, and a portion of it broiled upon a fire kindled of dry wood that gave but little smoke.

Bowers of bushes had been constructed for Mollie and Hazel, and for Jove, to protect them from the chill mountain night air.

As evening approached, a reconnaissance of the country to the west and south was decided upon. Bandy went west and Old Tom and the darky, Buzzy, went south.

Four or five miles from camp the latter struck a well-beaten cattle-trail entering the narrow mouth of a canyon, and while they were discussing the advisability of following it, they were joined by Old Kit Bandy, who, striking the trail west of Bald Knob, had followed it around to that point.

It was now dusk, and under cover of the shadows the three set off up the canyon, determined to follow it to the end, for they were satisfied it led to a ranch far or near.

The defile was narrow and deep, but broadened slightly as they advanced.

Less than a mile from the entrance a light suddenly burst on their view in a side canyon, off to their right. It was about forty rods away, and that it shone from a cabin there was not a doubt.

Into this defile the three scouts turned and cautiously approached the light.

They found the pass widened as they advanced, and finally terminated in a little wooded park of five or six acres, surrounded by high and rugged bluffs. In the center of the park, and almost concealed among the overhanging pines, was a log cabin. From the open door of this domicile the light was shining.

Up to within ten feet of the building the scouts crept. An open window was on the side next to them. Bandy crept still closer and looked in. It was a large, commodious cabin, with but one room and but one door. A stove, tables, chairs and other furniture could be seen. It was a well-furnished room, and had an air of comfort about it.

But a single occupant was visible—a middle-aged man whose limp revealed the fact that he was a cripple.

Kit had scarcely made this survey of the interior of the hut when two horsemen galloped up to the door and dismounted. The scouts shrunk back into the shadows.

"Who's there?" the man inside was heard to call out, as he limped to the door.

"It's all right, Peg," was answered.

"Ah! it's you, is it, Cap Lurid?" Peg was heard to say.

"Yes, and the Duke of Argonne," Lurid responded, "and we're starving—haven't had a bite since morning—and I want you to knock up a supper fit for royalty—make us a cup of coffee strong enough to bear up a stone!"

"None o' the other boys be here?" Peg asked.

"Not one; all that's not dead or wounded are off eastward after Old Bandy and his cut-throat gang. Hurry up supper!" was the captain's answer, that provoked a hopeful feeling in the breasts of the three eavesdroppers.

The outlaw and the Duke unsaddled their horses, and, turning them loose, entered the cabin. Kit resumed his position near the window, where he could watch proceedings. He saw Lurid unbuckle his revolver-belt and hang it on the wall, remove his coat and hat, and then throw himself into a chair with the ease and freedom of a man in his own house. But the villain was evidently ill at ease, for he was heard to declare:

"Stanley, I am heartily sick of our infernal luck! If them fellows get away, I'd as well get out of Jackson Basin, and you'll lose your prize, that charming girl guide. It seems it is no use to buck against Old Kit Bandy."

"By Jove!" responded the Englishman, "you're discouraged, captain—out of sorts. You'll be all right when you've had a good supper. Shades of Bacchus! I wish I had some good old English rum to brace you up on!"

Thus the two men conversed for an hour. Meanwhile Peg was busy preparing supper, and the odor of cooking viands and the aroma of coffee reached out into the night, whetting the

appetites of the scouts to a keeness almost uncontrollable.

Finally Peg announced supper ready, and the outlaw and his guest at once moved up to the table, that was loaded with tempting edibles.

They had scarcely seated themselves, however, when two figures glided into the room and confronted them!

It was Old Kit Bandy and Tom Rattler, each with a revolver in his hand.

At sight of them the outlaws seemed paralyzed with sudden fear, but, quickly recovering, Lurid attempted to rise, when Bandy raised his revolver, saying:

"Keep your seat, captain! Don't mind us; but the first one that attempts to draw a weapon 'll git shot dead! I'm Kit Bandy, and it's no use to buck me!"

Lurid sunk back into his chair, the very picture of baffled rage, while the Duke became speechless with terror, and Peg crouched in the corner with abject fear.

Neither Lurid nor the Englishman had a weapon about him. In that retreat of the outlaw chief, danger such as confronted them was never dreamed of.

"Peg," said Old Kit, after a moment's pause, "we'll sup with these royal nobs. Lay two more plates for Tom Rattler and me, and pour two more cups of that luxurious coffee; and be spry 'bout it!"

Peg, trembling with fear, hastily complied, and Kit and Old Tom seated themselves at the table, facing the two outlaws, laying their revolvers by their plates.

Buzzy was left outside on guard.

Mustering up some courage Captain Lurid finally said, attempting to make the best of the situation:

"Kit Bandy, there's no need of you forcing an invitation to dine at my table. I have never refused even an enemy something to eat."

"You're generous, captain," retorted Old Tom, "with yer grub, but hard on the rancher's cattle and gals. The Duke o' Oregon, here, I met once before—"

"Ah! indeed? By Jove! where?" the English adventurer exclaimed, endeavoring to appear calm and undaunted.

"At Cinnabar," answered Tom, "and I thought then you war a fraud."

"By Jove! you hare very hexpressive in your thoughts!"

"Oh, very! Kitsie, pass me the sugar, please."

The old scouts helped themselves freely and appeared to relish the food better than their companions, notwithstanding Lurid's great hunger when he first arrived.

The situation was both novel and ludicrous. Mortal enemies they were, the host at the mercy of the guests, all eating at the same table and carrying on a conversation—to all appearances enjoying a social supper!

But, not a move did Lurid or the Englishman, or even Peg, make but it was observed by Kit and Tom. This, however, the outlaws were not ignorant of, and the cocked revolvers lying by the intruders' plates were argument enough to convince them that it was useless to "buck" against Kit Bandy.

The meal was drawing to a close when, all of a sudden, a black face was thrust into the window, and a voice said:

"Golly! you folks gwine to bu'st youahseffs eatin'! Be you gwine to leab George Washington Bee nuffin' to eat same as I'se been eatin' all night?"

"Patience, Buzzy, you black rascal!" enjoined Old Kit.

The presence of the darky seemed to cast additional gloom over the spirits of the outlaws.

Old Kit now arose from the table, took up his revolver, calmly saying:

"Now, gentlemen, I have to put you folks to the trouble of being escorted hence. Captain Lurid's presence is greatly desired all over Montana and Wyoming, and the Duke will be entertained by the authorities, also; and—"

His words were here cut short by a desperate movement of the outlaw chief. Old Tom, who was still seated at the table, had turned his eyes to watch the lame man, Peg, when, with the quickness of a hawk, Lurid thrust his arm over the table and seized Rattler's revolver by the muzzle, which was toward him.

Tom, however, saw the movement, and grabbed at the revolver, pulling the trigger as he did so. The weapon was discharged, the ball striking Lurid square in the breast, killing him instantly—dying, as it were, by his own hand!

Terror-stricken, Peg dropped under the table, and the Englishman endeavored to escape through the open door, but received a shot in the

From Bandy's revolver and pitched forward, mortally wounded.

No harm was done the cowardly Peg, who begged piteously for his miserable life.

The Englishman was carried and placed on a bunk and everything done that was possible to ease his pain.

Before he died he confessed that he was the degenerate son of a worthy English sire, but declined to give his real name. He admitted that he had been engaged with the outlaws in stealing horses and cattle for some two years—that he had met and fallen passionately in love with Hazel Bell, and finding his love unreciprocated, had finally resorted to her abduction. But death at length was the reward of his villainy and crimes.

Old Kit made Peg hustle around and put up such provision as he had in the house already cooked. It was packed in a good-sized basket and given Buzzy to carry, that worthy having satiated his appetite at the outlaw's table while Kit and Tom were listening to the Englishman's dying confession.

Having cautioned Peg to make no attempt, under penalty of death, to leave the cabin, or to give any alarm, the scouts appropriated Captain Lurid's weapons and three blankets; then all took their departure for Bald Knob.

CHAPTER XXI.

OUT OF JACKSON BASIN.

It was over a week before Little Jove and Hazel had so far recovered as to enable the party to start on their retreat from Jackson Basin, although both continued to improve from the very first.

They were not molested while at Bald Knob by the alarmed and discouraged rustlers.

In fact, the death of Lurid, and the exaggerated stories which the terrified Peg had to tell of the unknown numbers of the invaders, filled them with mortal terror and sent them into hiding among the mountain fastnesses.

When the invaders finally started, they moved northward, and after days of slow journeying entered the Yellowstone Park, and at length reached the home of Hazel Bell, where she and all the party were welcomed with acclaims of joy.

When Bandy and his Big Six with Mollie, started on for Rosebud Ranch the parting of the girls was an affecting one.

Little Jove remained at the home of the tourist's guide, and there, under the gentle care and ministrations of Hazel, his cruel wounds healed.

Jove Runkells was disfigured for life; but it was a disfigurement of which he was proud, the reward that it brought him—the love of the beautiful Hazel—amply repaid him for all he had done and endured.

The journey to Rosebud Ranch was safely pursued, and Mollie was restored to the arms of her father. There was, of course, great rejoicing over all that great range when the news of the rescue became known, and the names of Kit Bandy, Tom Rattler and Ichabod Flea—the terrible trio—and of the gallant Young Patrols were inscribed on honor's roll in the minds and hearts of the homesteaders.

At Rosebud Ranch Kit Bandy threw up his "commission" as leader of that heroic little band, much to the regret of his Big Six.

"I'd like to stay with you, boys," he said, one day while he and Ichabod and Rattler were still sojourning at the ranch, "but there is work for us three to do. We haven't finished up that Jackson Basin gang, to my suiting. The death of Captain Lurid will soon be forgotten and his place filled by that howlin' terror, Black Bill Bates. No, I can't rest while that Basin is the home of a single outlaw."

"All this sounds well," put in Old Tom Rattler, "but the magnet—the loadstone o' Jackson Basin that's drawin' Kit Bandy back there, boys, is Bunty McCorkle, the fat tigress o' Terrace Nook. She warbled off some nice things to Old Kit and her purrin' melted his great heart. Kitsie's a lilly-lipped hummer from away over yon."

"Tom Rattler," said Old Kit, "you're goin' back, you say, with us to the Basin, and just as sure as we run across Bunty McCorkle I'll give you into her keepin' for a slave. She'll teach you some manners, Bunty will."

Bandy and pard, and Old Tom, after a good week's rest, took an affectionate leave of all and departed mountainward.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SECRET OF THE DIARIES.

It was decided by the homestead ranchmen to continue the Range Patrol under Captain Ralph Kirkman, and that the posse be increased to ten men.

The new company, including all the old members, except poor Joe Randolph, who was asleep in Jackson Basin, was organized at Rosebud Ranch, and was to depart on a certain day for the range.

An hour or two before they were ready to depart, Mollie Adamson, now the betrothed sweetheart of Ralph Kirkman, approached Ralph and said:

"Ralph, I want you to go with father and me into the parlor."

"Ah! you want to give me another diary, eh?" inferred Ralph.

"No; I want to tell you and father the secret of the diaries I gave you all when you started off, six weeks ago," the maiden replied.

Together the three entered the parlor, and when they were seated, Ralph said:

"Now I am ready to hear the secret of the Six Diaries."

"Oh, you think there is nothing to my secret," Ralph, Mollie said, with a little laugh; "but I'll show you there is. Of course you remember that, when I gave you the diaries, I told you I wanted data for a book I was going to write."

"Yes; I remember that perfectly well, Mollie," Ralph admitted; "but I presume your three weeks' experience in Jackson Basin and the mountains is all-sufficient for a very interesting volume without our records."

"I must confess I 'yarned' a little to you folks about wanting data for a book," Mollie went on; "but I think I was justified in doing so, and I'll now tell you why: One day, after the Range Patrols had been selected, and before you left, I was coming up from Shafer's ranch, on one of my rides, when, at a certain point on the way, I noticed two flat stones lying one upon the other. Curiosity prompted me to dismount and move the top stone, when, to my surprise, I found a folded paper which had been concealed between the stones. I took it up, opened it and read it. I have that letter in my hand, and I will read it:

"September 2d.

"FRIEND TUG:—

"I hardly know how to commence this letter. I received your letter in due time. Yes, I have been selected as one of the Range Patrols, and I think it a compliment. You say there are parties who will give me a big sum if I will, while serving the homestead ranchers, also help them by keeping them posted as to the movements of the Patrol, so they—your friends—will run no risk in running horses and cattle into the Basin. Now I am on the make, but don't want to agree to anything until I know what's in it for me. I never did play double, and I hardly know how to go about it. Now I'll be out on the range before you can reply, but I will do this: I will meet you in the timber at the Red Rock ford above Groan Creek Ranch, at noon on the twelfth day of September, and we will have an understanding. Do not forget the place and date.

"ONE OF THE SIX PATROLS."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Ralph, when Mollie had finished reading. "That surely is a forgery!"

"I thought so at the time," Mollie replied, "but I copied the letter, and left the copy for 'Friend Tug,' and kept the original. I wanted to compare the handwriting with that of the Six Range Patrols, and if I could find out the traitor—"

"Ah! you were doing a little detective work!" exclaimed Ralph, laughing. "I see, now, why you gave us those diaries—to get hold of our handwriting. That's going a long way around. But you got the diaries, now who is the culprit?"

"Let me read to you from one of the diaries," said Mollie, "and then you can judge accordingly."

"Sept. 12th.

"In camp in Pine Hollow. This has been a terrible day with me. A temptation was held out to me to betray my trust as a Patrol, and the devil got a hold on me so far as to tempt me to make an appointment with one of the Rustlers' agents at Red Rock Ford. To-day I was to have met him, but I thank God I have resisted the temptation and kept away from the ford. Captain Kirkman is absent, but, as soon as he returns I mean to tell him all, and turn the whole thing to our advantage. I do not know why I

was selected as one who would prove false to a trust, for I never did such a thing in my life, but suppose Tug Endson, whom I used to know, presumed that I was weak and could be tempted, and he was pretty near right. How I wish Kirkman would come in! But, it's bed-time. Alf but the guard are asleep."

"Mollie!" exclaimed Ralph, when she had finished reading, "from whose diary are you reading?"

"Guess!" said Mollie, closing the book.

"I cannot—I cannot think who of all those brave boys any one would dare to tempt in such a manner!"

"Joe Randolph is the man. This is his diary, brought me by Kit Bandy," Mollie announced.

"Poor Joe!" sighed Ralph; "as brave as the bravest; and yet he nearly fell in the tempter's snare! But his confession is an open, manly one."

"And fully exonerates him!" declared Captain Adamson.

"But the letter I intercepted," said Mollie, smiling, "and my woman's curiosity got me into trouble that finally cost poor Joe his life. I was not content to wait for the diaries to determine the traitor by his handwriting, but I mounted my horse and rode down into the vicinity of Red Rock Ford in hopes of seeing who of the Six Patrols came there. No Patrol came, but I soon discovered a number of outlaws and Indians were there, and I suppose the man 'Tug,' was there, also, and when I started to ride away they followed me and a race ensued. I met you, and you gave me your horse, but I was captured afterward—as to how, I have already told you. This is the secret of the diaries, and a girl's attempt at detective work!"

"I can see now that if I had turned the intercepted letter over to father, or you, and let you have watched the boys, I might have been spared much suffering, but—"

"But what, Mollie?" interrupted Ralph, seeing she hesitated.

"Oh! no difference now," she replied.

"I understand, Mollie," said Ralph; "you were afraid I might prove to be the traitor, and—"

"But you were not, were you, Ralph?" she demanded, her face radiant with joy.

"No; and I thank God none of the boys were guilty of any crime, but as Range Patrols proved themselves faithful, and as Kit Bandy's Big Six won the honor of heroes!"

THE END.

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